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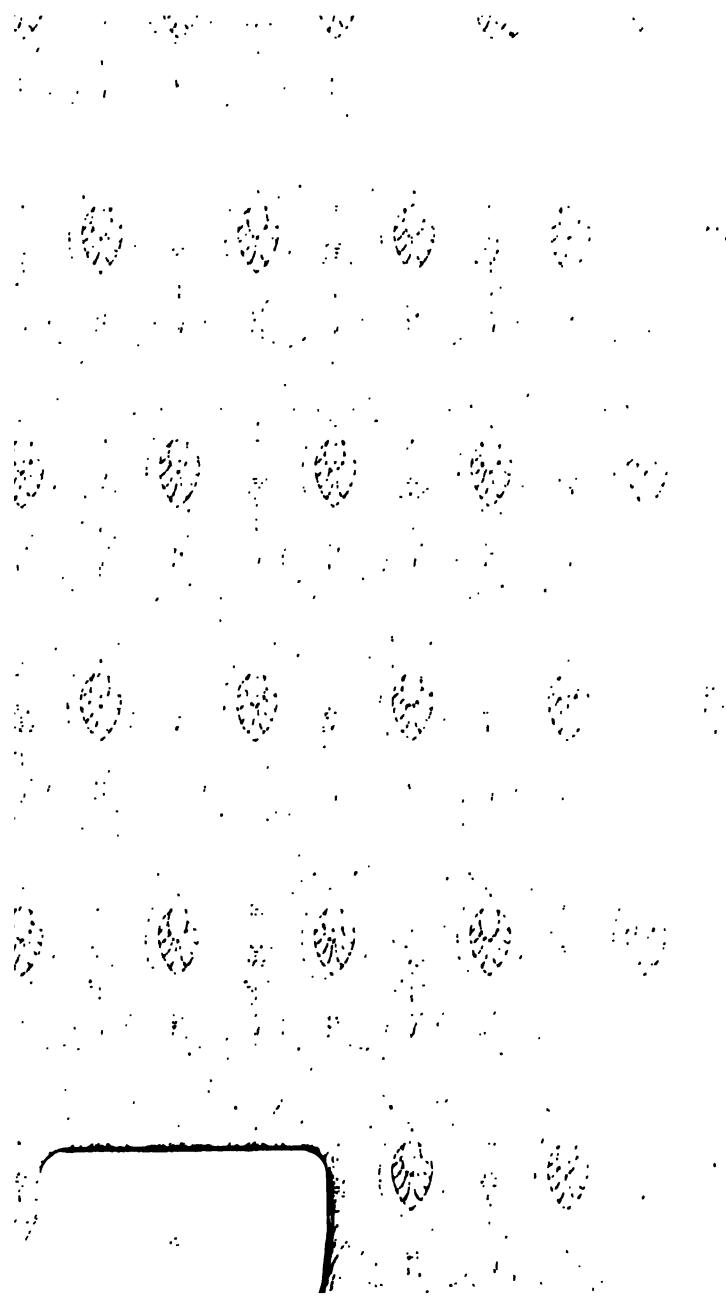
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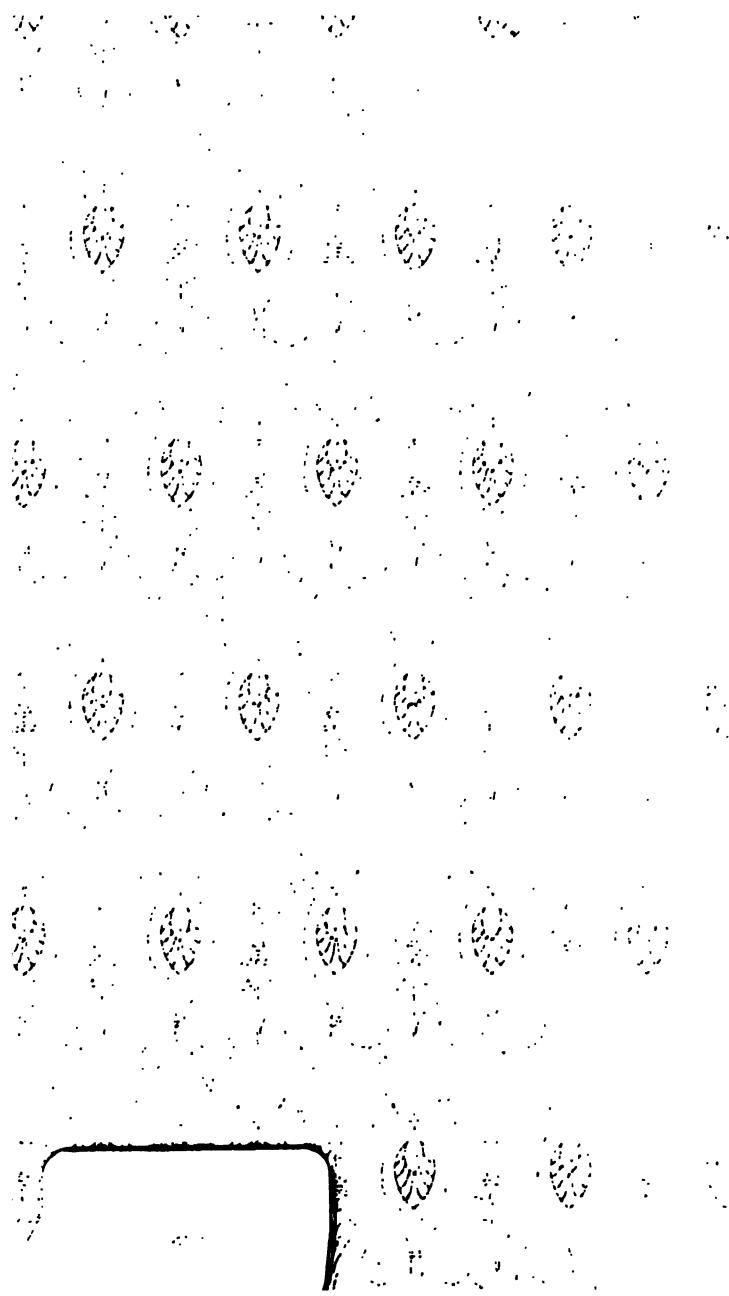
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A WESTERN WILDFLOWER









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A

WESTERN WILDFLOWER.

BY
KATHARINE LEE.

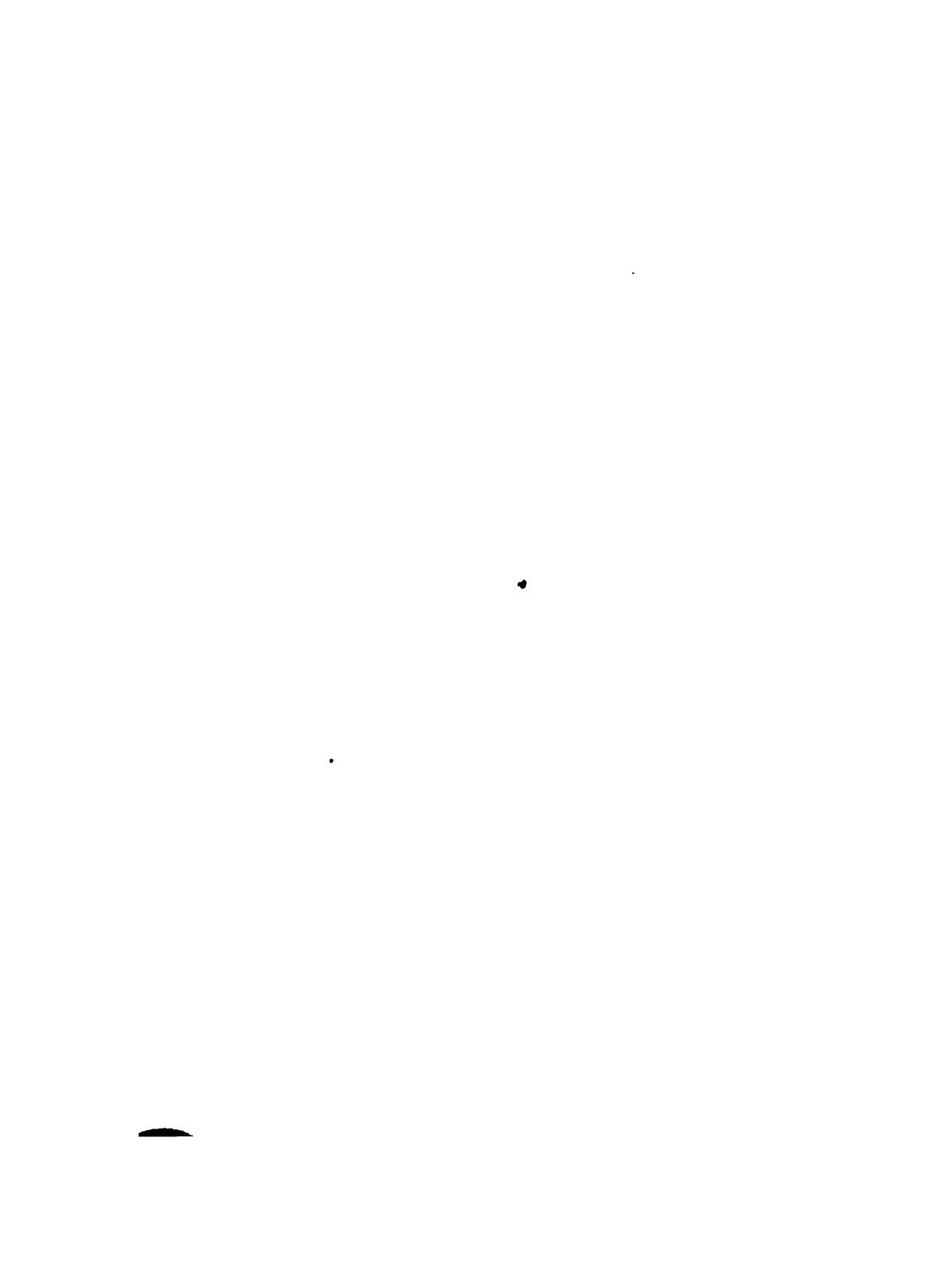
IN THREE VOLUMES.

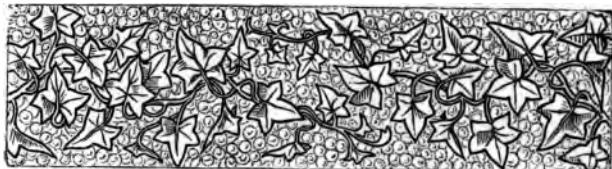
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A

WESTERN WILDFLOWER.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was a certain amount of excitement at the Rectory the next day. Joyce wondered why they all thought so much of Walter's coming, while they took so little notice of the younger son's existence. The best bedroom was prepared for him, and even Flo exerted herself sufficiently to go into the garden and gather some roses to put on his table—an attention that Joyce afterwards discovered

was quite thrown away upon its object, for the glass was pushed away into a corner by him to make room for his books.

All the morning Mrs. Hyde and Blanche were bustling about seeing after some new curtains for the bed, and superintending the housemaid at her work. Joyce had never seen so much activity displayed before, or heard so much conversation since she had been in the house; and even the Archdeacon talked about his son and his doings all through dinner-time with a fatherly pride that Joyce thought was the pleasantest thing she had seen about him. It was evident that they all thought a great deal of this brilliant youth, and Joyce was eager and excited to see such a wonderful cousin. She asked a great many questions about him, and for the first time she neglected Robert, who was inclined to answer gruffly, and did not reply to her queries as readily

as Mrs. Hyde and the girls did. After dinner, Mrs. Hyde sat on the sofa in the drawing-room, and gave Joyce a long account of her eldest-born. He was from his birth the most wonderful child that had ever been created, could talk at an unnaturally early age, and learnt to read before other children could speak plainly. He was a miracle of cleverness, and used to astonish all about him by the precocity of his questions, and his great talents. At three he read fluently ; at four he was well acquainted with geography, and could discourse upon early heresies, being always of a most religious turn of mind ; at five he began Latin, and composed an English poem. When he went to school at eight he was placed in classes with boys of twelve. He won a good scholarship, and afterwards distinguished himself brilliantly at Oxford, where he took a first-class and a fellowship,

and was now one of the tutors of his college. All this and much more Joyce learnt of her cousin, and with every additional revelation she grew shyer and shyer of meeting so learned a person; so that when she heard the pony-carriage drive up to the door in the evening she felt too bashful to follow her cousins downstairs into the hall to greet the new arrival.

She came out and stood at the top of the stairs, feeling very lonely and desolate in the sound of the greetings and talking below. No one seemed to miss her, or even remember her existence. She seemed to have no part or lot with them, and to be really nothing more than an outsider taken in out of charity. She scarcely felt to-night that they were her relations at all, they seemed so far from her in all real love and sympathy; yet they were all she had in the world; she had no other ties or friends—

not a creature in existence who held a welcome in its heart for her, or who loved her. Her father's distant grave held all the friendliness of the world for her.

Her heart was very sore and heavy as she leaned against the banisters in her loneliness, listening to the welcoming below. This cordiality and pleasure contrasted painfully with the cold reception that had been given to her. It was natural that it should be so, but it made Joyce's heart swell to think of the difference. She was half-minded to run away and hide in her room, and see how long it would be before they remembered her and fetched her out to be one of them.

In another moment she would have been in her bedroom, but at that instant Flo appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Joyce would not run away after she had been seen, so she walked slowly into the drawing-room,

and presently the whole family came in.

“Oh, here is Joyce!” said Mrs. Hyde. “Walter dear, this is your new cousin. We have told you about her in our letters.”

Joyce came forward a little shyly, and held out her hand. She was very much surprised at her new relation’s appearance. She had expected that he would be tall and dark-haired, like his father and Robert. But she saw before her a little man, not much taller than his mother, whom he rather resembled in face, though he had the straight Hyde nose instead of her somewhat *retroussé* feature. He was pale and slight, with scanty light hair, and a small brown moustache and no beard. He had light eyes, with rather heavy white lids that he had a trick of blinking and letting fall as if wearied by much use; a very quiet mild expression; and but for the large arched

forehead and head, no one would have guessed him to be a clever man. His speech, too, was slow and decided, and gave the impression of carefully weighing each word before he uttered it. He was faultlessly dressed in black, and although his clothes were not clerical, they had a kind of resemblance to that attire. He came up to his cousin and took her hand, saying a few commonplace sentences about her being there, and then went and stood beside his father in front of the empty fireplace.

The Archdeacon, in his delight at having his eldest son at home again, was overflowing with good-humour, and questions of Oxford life and learning, to which the son responded briefly, and it seemed to Joyce with a certain air of weariness of the subjects. He stood with his hands behind him, and his eyes wandered slowly about the

room in an apparently aimless short-sighted manner ; yet Joyce found that whenever she looked at him he was looking at her.

Presently he asked his mother some question about the garden, and seemed more interested in listening to her talk about the farm, and her flowers, and small parish news, than he had been with his father's rapid questions.

Perhaps the truth was that her simple rambling talk of trivial matters rested him somewhat and did not require any very close amount of personal attention, for his eyes wandered more than ever, and his answers were fewer and briefer, and it seemed a relief to him when the supper-bell rang and they went downstairs.

Joyce found that his place at the table was next hers, between her and Eanswith ; but as she was never expected to talk at

meals, she did not feel alarmed at this close proximity to her learned cousin.

To her surprise, however, they had scarcely seated themselves when Walter said to her :

“ What do you do with yourself here ?”

She blushed all over as she answered :

“ I don’t know exactly. We go to church, and for walks, and—well, I hardly know what else.”

“ You have finished your education ?” he asked.

Joyce felt hotter than ever as she replied :

“ I never had any—that is, schooling ; I never went to school.”

“ But you have learnt something ?”

“ I can read and write, and draw,” she said with a little embarrassed laugh. “ I can’t play the piano, but I can sing.”

“ You never told us you could do that dear,” said Mrs. Hyde half reprovingly.

“ I was never asked,” said Joyce, biting her lip ; she had been a good deal hurt by it being so completely taken for granted that because she could not play the piano therefore she had had no musical education, for in reality she had a very good voice that had been carefully trained by her father.

“ Dear, dear !” said the Archdeacon, “ why didn’t you tell us you could sing, Joyce ? we might have got up some part-songs together. However, now Walter is here we can do them all the better. We might have a concert in the schoolroom. We must have some music after supper. Walter, you still sing, of course ?”

“ No, not much,” said Walter ; “ I have no time. You say you have never been to school ?” he went on addressing Joyce.

“ No, but father taught me French, and a little Latin in the winters,” she said,

unwilling that her new cousin should think her altogether so ignorant as she seemed.

His sleepy eyes brightened a little.

“ You must let me help you with your studies,” he said ; “ we will do some Latin in the mornings—that is, if you have no objection,” he added courteously.

“ Thank you, I shall be very glad,” said Joyce, pleased that he did not consider her beneath his notice, though she was aware of the gloomy and savage glare with which Robert regarded her from the other side of the table, and of the girls’ surprised looks. Even the Archdeacon and Mrs. Hyde seemed altogether astonished at this proposal of their son’s, and for a few moments there was absolute silence at the table.

Presently the Archdeacon asked his son if he had read a correspondence between himself and another clergyman in the

Church Times about some disputed point of early Church practice ; and on his son's replying in the affirmative, a discussion followed upon the merits of the case, during which the other members of the family preserved a total silence.

After prayers Joyce wondered whether she would be expected to bestow the same embrace upon this prim, still, formidable cousin as she gave to Robert ; but he settled the matter for her by holding out his hand and saying in his slow precise manner :

“Good-night to you.”

After that she escaped and went in search of Robert, to whom she had not spoken since supper ; but he was gone into his room, and when she reached her own she found a small piece of paper with the one word “Fikkel,” evidently in his hand-writing, upon her dressing-table. She

could not help laughing over his ill-temper, and went to bed fully resolved to have it out with him and make friends with him in the morning.

But although she rose early and went to each of his well-known haunts, no Robert was to be found. He came in too late for prayers, and made some muttered sulky excuse of having been round to the village, and directly the breakfast was over he departed without a word to anyone.

Joyce was vexed and annoyed that he should choose to quarrel with her because she had replied to his brother's questions, and she determined that if he was so unreasonable and foolish, he must take his own time to come round again, and that the next seeking should come from him. So for several days she saw nothing of him but his scowling face at meal-times, and during these days she saw a good deal of his brother.



“I cannot think what has happened to Walter,” said Flo one day; “he used to despise us girls, and hardly ever condescended to speak to us. Now he is for ever coming among us and talking about books, and all sorts of dry learned things. I am sure I wish he would not; he is an awful bore.”

“I don’t think so,” said Joyce; “I think it’s very interesting to listen to what he says. I am sure what he told us yesterday about the Crusades was very interesting indeed.”

“I don’t care for such things,” said Flo, with a yawn. “I would rather talk about garden-parties and skating. I hate books.”

“Well, I like some,” said Joyce; “I don’t care about goody little stories, but I like books about real things very much. Walter is going to lend me Froude’s ‘Julius Cæsar.’ He says it’s splendid.”

“I envy you,” said Flo, “now Walter has taken you in hand. He tried it on with me one summer when he was at home, and I believe at one time he had great hopes of me, but I soon got tired of all those dry things. You went the right way to curry favour with him, Joyce, by pretending you wanted to learn Latin ; Walter worships the classics.”

“I didn’t pretend,” said Joyce angrily. “I did want to learn ; and as to currying favour, I don’t do that with anybody, and it’s real mean of you to say so ;” and Joyce walked away full of indignation.

She was so much hurt by Flo’s suggestions that for some days she refused to continue her studies, and it was only after Walter spoke to her very seriously as to the wrongfulness of neglecting such opportunities as were offered her that she consented to renew them ; but her manner, which had

gradually become open and free as she lost her shyness of him, now shrank back into coldness and even at times haughtiness. He did not appear to notice the difference, but kept her pretty constantly employed at her lessons, setting her regular tasks every day, and proving himself a rather strict master. Joyce wondered sometimes why she submitted to him, but he was so earnest about it, and seemed to have such a real desire to improve her mind, that she would have found it hard to refuse him even if she had not been so anxious herself to learn.





CHAPTER II.

“**J**OYCE,” said her uncle one morning, as he came in to breakfast, “there is a letter for you.”

“For me!” cried Joyce; “why, who can be writing to me? I don’t know anybody to do such a thing!”

“Better open it and see,” said the Archdeacon, sitting down.

Joyce, her face crimson with excitement, pulled open the envelope and hastily read it. It was on old-fashioned scented paper, and had a crest at the top.

“Oh, aunt,” she cried, “it’s an invitation for you and me to go to Shere Court! It’s

from Mrs. Leybourne, and she actually apologises for not coming to see me ! Did you ever hear anything so funny ? And she wants you and me to go there to lunch to-morrow—oh, you will go, won't you ?"

Mrs. Hyde looked at her husband.

" Yes, yes, go of course," he said. " Does she mention only you two ?"

Joyce handed the letter to her aunt.

" It is very odd she does not ask the girls," she said, returning it ; " she does not say a word about them."

" To-morrow, did you say ?" said the Archdeacon. " Dear, dear ! why Walter and I were going to Moulbury. You can't walk all that way."

" Oh, Aunt Christina, it isn't so very far, and the fields are not a bit wet," cried Joyce.

" Can you walk ?" said Mrs. Hyde's husband.

“Oh yes, dear, I can manage that—that is, if you think we had better go.”

“Go, yes ; why not ?” said the Archdeacon ; so the matter was settled.

Accordingly the next day Joyce and her aunt left Charrington Rectory about twelve o’clock for their walk to Shere Court. The Archdeacon and his son had previously driven to Moulbury, some six miles away, to attend a clerical meeting, and to lunch with the Dean afterwards. It did occur to Joyce that they were better able to walk six miles than her aunt three ; but as it obviously did not present itself in that light to anyone else, nothing was said on the subject. Joyce rather enjoyed her walk. Away from the rest of the family gentle Mrs. Hyde was at liberty to let the native kindness of her heart come out towards her orphan niece. It was her misfortune rather than her fault that she was compelled to

take her tone from those around her rather than from her own desires and feelings. "Papa" and "the girls" had decided that Joyce was rather an undesirable sort of person, and Mrs. Hyde acquiesced in their decision, as she always did; but when away from them she for the time forgot their wisdom, and was as genial, pleasant, and cordial with her as possible. They had an agreeable talk in Mrs. Hyde's own gentle, mildly enthusiastic way, and Joyce felt that she had never seen her aunt at her best before.

In due time, for Mrs. Hyde was not a very fast walker, they arrived at Shere Court. Austin was on the look-out for them, and brought them into the house.

Mrs. Leybourne came out into the hall to greet her guests. She was always a grave, dignified-looking old lady, and on this occasion her gravity and her dignity were



more visible than usual. She gave her hand to Joyce after having done so to Mrs. Hyde, and at the same time bent such keen dark eyes upon her that Joyce's own bright grey ones fell beneath their searching gaze. She blushed and felt uncomfortable. There was something menacing in the old lady's look, and as she withdrew her hand, Joyce almost felt as though she had been guilty of some wrong-doing, or had been detected in some covert act.

Austin longed to come to her assistance. He had been unaccountably nervous about this meeting between Joyce and his mother. Not that he had feared his mother would do or say anything hard or uncourteous to the orphan girl, but he had been anxiously desirous that she should make a good impression upon the elder lady. He had no reason to give himself for caring so much about the subject, but he knew well enough

that he did wish it very much, and he knew in a moment that it had not been as he wished.

“You are like your father,” his mother said, after she had dropped the girl’s hand, —“very like your father about the nose and mouth—but you have not his eyes or colouring.”

“Father always said my eyes and hair were like my mother’s,” said Joyce, blushing and feeling guilty of she knew not what.

“You are not so young as I supposed,” said the old lady, looking at her as she spoke.

“I am only just past seventeen,” said Joyce, wondering why she felt it wrong to be so old.

“Have you ever had any brothers or sisters?”

“No, mother died when I was born.”

There was a quick gleam of light in Mrs. Leybourne’s eyes. Her son, who saw

it, could scarcely suppress an exclamation of horror, it looked so terribly like a ray of pleasure at hearing that some sort of retribution had fallen on the man she considered her enemy. It shocked him so much that he turned away, saying to Joyce :

“Would you like to look at the pictures here before going into the drawing-room?”

Joyce followed him across the polished floor to the other side of the hall, and his mother and Mrs. Hyde passed into the drawing-room.

As she came up to him he noticed that her eyes were full of tears. A flush passed over his usually pale face as he bent over her.

“You must not mind what my mother says,” he said to her very gently. “She is old now, and has fancies from living so long in this dreary place. I am sure she would not willingly hurt you.”

“Please don’t notice it,” said Joyce, with a little sob. “But oh! why does everybody so dreadfully disapprove of me over here? Folks in America never thought me so horrid!”

“Nobody does that here, I assure you,” he said very earnestly, touched by her pathetic little cry. “English ways are proverbially cold. Perhaps you feel the difference of manner, and fancy it means something deeper than it does.”

“No, it isn’t fancy,” said Joyce, shaking her head. “I know it is a great deal more than that. I can always tell when people like me and when they don’t. Nobody except Robert has ever really liked me at Charrington, and now he is vexed with me because Walter teaches me.”

“I am sure Mrs. Hyde likes you,” he said, wishing to make her take as hopeful a view of things as he could.

“Aunt Christina is very kind, and I think she would like me a little if we were alone, but she disapproves of me dreadfully sometimes. It’s dreadful to be considered outside everybody,” she added, looking up into his face with her clear eyes in which the tears were still shining.

Austin Leybourne folded his arms and leant against an old piece of carved furniture that stood in the hall.

“You are very young to feel that,” he said, looking at her steadily.

“I guess it’s being old that makes me feel so,” said Joyce, drawing herself up with a sigh ; “I never used to feel so. I am ages and ages older since I came to England. I wonder whether living in a country that has so many old things in it is what makes one feel old?”

“I should think not,” he said, smiling ; “but you must not talk of feeling old yet.”

“ I do,” said Joyce earnestly. “ I feel hundreds when Flo looks at me, and the Archdeacon puts his eyebrows up, and they all say nothing. I wish they would scold me sometimes instead. Do you think I am very different from other people ?”

“ Yes,” he answered, with the same quiet smile upon his face ; then, seeing that she looked distressed, he added, “ you are very much prettier.”

She flushed angrily, and walked to the window.

“ I *hate* compliments,” she exclaimed ; “ it was real mean of you to say that. I thought you were going to be nice.”

“ So I will be, if you will forgive me,” he said, coming beside her. “ It was ‘ real mean ’ of me to say that ; but you did look so nice, and fresh, and young in this dreary old place, I could not help it. Do you think you could make friends with a dry

old man like me ?—I am nearly old enough to be your father, you know—and if you don't mind that, I should like to be friends with you. I am just as lonely as you are."

She looked up at him brightly, and put her hands in his.

" I will be real friends with you always," she said ; " I am glad you don't disapprove of me too."

" On the contrary," he said, and there was a little thrill in his voice which he tried to hide ; " I approve of you very highly, and to show you that I do so I will take you into my *sanctum sanctorum*, a privilege hitherto denied to your sex ;" and so saying he led the way out of the house. They passed along the front, and on turning the corner towards the orchard, Joyce saw that two additional rooms had been built on to this side of the house ; and as Austin unlocked the door and let her in she saw that

the lower room was a kind of workshop, for therein was a lathe, as well as several machines that she did not know the use of, and a quantity of tools were strewn about on the benches and table.

“This is my workshop,” he said; “I dabble a little in several things, and in so lonely a place as this a small knowledge of carpentering and glazing goes a long way. But this is not what I wanted to show you; anybody may come here.”

He unlocked a door at the farther end, and Joyce followed him up a rough staircase into the upper room. This was a much more comfortable place than the other. There was a well-filled bookcase, and a pile or two of books reposed on the floor, mingled with papers and pamphlets. A large table was literally covered with writing-materials in the last extreme of untidiness, but what interested Joyce far more

than anything else was a large telescope that stood on one side. The roof was made to open over it, but was now closed by a glass shutter. Several other instruments were about the room, and a quantity of diagrams of the stars and moon hung against the wall.

“Are you an astronomer?” cried Joyce, as she came in and stood looking about her.

“Oh dear, no,” he said, making a clear space for her to sit on, by tossing a large collection of papers on to the floor from a chair. “Will you sit down? No, I am far from being that; but I am fond of the science, and like to make what observations I can.”

“And have you made any discoveries?” she asked, going up to the big telescope, and looking at it.

“Well, nothing to be really called discoveries,” he said, turning some papers

over on the table. "There are a few things I have noticed that I don't see in any books on the subject, but I have no doubt plenty of other people have seen them too."

"But you ought to write about them," she said. "Why should you wish to keep things to yourself?"

"Oh, it's not that," he said hastily. "I assure you it is not from selfish motives that I do not do so. But, really—well, you see, it would be rather difficult to collect my observations and put them into proper form," he added, glancing at the heaps of paper scattered about the room.

"They are mighty untidy," said Joyce, following his glance; "but I guess they could get cleared up some if you were to really set to work."

"I don't think it is worth while," he said, pulling his long moustache and looking at her with his dark, melancholy eyes; "and,

you see, nobody would care to read what I wrote about anything. I used to believe I was going to make a great name for myself, but that is all over years ago."

"That's downright silly," said Joyce, with her usual directness of speech. "Father used to say that when people talked very humble, it was more likely that they were over-proud."

"Do you think that is what is the matter with me?" he asked, a good deal amused at what she said.

"Oh, I don't know," said Joyce, jumping up from her seat and going to inspect the bookcase. "How can I tell? but it appears to me that if you have got anything to say you ought to say it."

"But I can't tell whether it is anything very much worth saying."

"That isn't true," said Joyce, facing him. "I can tell quite well from your face that

you have found out something. Now confess, haven't you?"

"Well, I think I have," he answered.

"There!" said Joyce, bringing her hands together triumphantly. "I knew it. Now you must write a book!"

"Will you read it if I do?"

"Not if it's very dry; but likely I shouldn't understand it, anyway. Now show me what sort of things you have found out."

He selected a quantity of diagrams from the table, and explained them to her. She listened with great attention, and asked several questions; indeed, so intent was he in explaining, and she in listening, that they never heard the luncheon-bell sound from the house, and not until a servant was sent to call them did they become aware of how long they had been there.

"Oh dear, it's so interesting!" sighed



Joyce, as she went down the stairs. "You will tell me some more, won't you?"

"Of course I will ; and some evening you will come and look through the telescope, won't you ? And then you will be able to see those rings of Saturn that I have been telling you about."

"Oh, that will be lovely !" cried Joyce ; and they went into the dining-room.

Mrs. Leybourne was sitting at the head of the table, looking decidedly displeased.

"I am sorry we are late, mother," her son said. "We did not hear the bell."

Mrs. Leybourne did not answer him, but turning to Joyce, said :

"My son tells me that you are interested in this old place on account of your father's connection with it. I suppose he has been showing you about the garden."

Joyce blushed furiously. How was it that they had both forgotten the object of

her visit? No thought of her father had been present; with something very like shame she remembered that they had talked of nothing but each other. She looked across the table to Austin. He looked very little less uncomfortable than herself.

“We have not been in the garden,” he said, recovering his composure in a moment; “I took Miss Hyde into my observatory, and she was good enough to be interested in the diagrams there.”

Mrs. Leybourne looked with cold surprise upon him.

“In your observatory,” she repeated; “I did not know you admitted anyone there, particularly ladies.”

“I only prohibit housemaids,” he answered, laughing; “my rule against them is fixed and unalterable. If you would care to see my telescope, Mrs. Hyde, I shall be

very pleased to show it you. You do not feel interested in it, I know, mother."

"No, Austin; I do not. I do not think passing your evenings up there in the cold has been good for you. Were you interested?" turning to Joyce.

"Yes, very much indeed," said Joyce, wishing she did not blush every time Mrs. Leybourne looked at her.

The lunch passed slowly, Austin and Mrs. Hyde keeping up most of the conversation. After it was over they all went out into the garden, and Austin pointed out to Joyce the various objects connected in his mind with her father. Joyce listened and asked a few questions, but she was ill at ease, and not quite herself; she did not feel the same interest in the old place that she had done before. The same enthusiasm was not roused in her. In some indefinable way she felt that she was disloyal

to her father: for even during her companion's tales of his early recollections of him, her mind would wander away to that little solitary room up the rough stairs, and the real interest of the day seemed centred on the diagrams of Saturn's rings rather than on associations of her father.

There was a change in her companion, too; calm, gentle, courteous as he always was, he was different as he stood talking to her and her aunt from what he had been when alone with her in that upper room. She could not tell where the difference lay, but she felt it was there, and it annoyed her.

They had no opportunity of going there again that day. Mrs. Leybourne and Mrs. Hyde were with them all the time, and when it was proposed that they should all go and see the telescope, Mrs. Leybourne objected that Mrs. Hyde would not like the

steep rough stairs, and somehow the refusal seemed a relief to Austin and Joyce.

Soon after four Mrs. Hyde said they must go, and Austin proposed to walk back with them, disregarding his mother's reminder that there was something to be seen to in the orchard. So the three set off together. They were to go back across the fields, which route, though a little longer than the way by the marshes, was a drier and less scrambling walk for Mrs. Hyde. At the end of the first long field the path crossed the high-road. While they were in the middle of the field Joyce fancied that she saw a figure appearing above the distant hedge, as though it had stood up in a vehicle of some sort to look across the field. It immediately dropped again, and soon, as the hedge became a little lower, she saw the heads of two men whom she felt certain she knew go slowly along the road, as if

to her father ; for even during her companion's tales of his early recollections of him, her mind would wander away to that little solitary room up the rough stairs, and the real interest of the day seemed centred on the diagrams of Saturn's rings rather than on associations of her father.

There was a change in her companion, too ; calm, gentle, courteous as he always was, he was different as he stood talking to her and her aunt from what he had been when alone with her in that upper room. She could not tell where the difference lay, but she felt it was there, and it annoyed her.

They had no opportunity of going there again that day. Mrs. Leybourne and Mrs. Hyde were with them all the time, and when it was proposed that they should all go and see the telescope, Mrs. Leybourne objected that Mrs. Hyde would not like the

steep rough stairs, and somehow the refusal seemed a relief to Austin and Joyce.

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their owners were driving at a very quiet rate.

When they came to the stile she was not so much surprised as the others were to see Bob and Sir Ethelred in the latter's new pony-carriage. They were driving very slowly, and were apparently intensely interested in what they were talking about, for the whole party were in the road before Sir Ethelred appeared to see them. He immediately pulled up and jumped out.

“How very odd that we should meet you!” he said, shaking hands with the ladies; “Bob and I have been trying the new carriage. It is my mother's, you know. How very lucky that we came this way! You will allow me to drive you back, will you not?”

“Oh, thank you! well, really, I hardly know. Joyce dear, what do you say?” asked Mrs. Hyde, in her perplexity at being called

upon to decide anything without the help of "papa" or "the girls."

Joyce somehow did not respond to this appeal; in fact, she did not appear to have any particular desire to shorten their walk.

"In with you, mum," said Bob, catching hold of his mother's arm, and Mrs. Hyde suffered herself to be placed in the carriage.

"Won't you come, dear?" she said, seeing that Joyce was still hesitating.

"Good-bye," said Joyce, holding out her hand to Austin. "I shall expect soon to hear that you have begun that writing."

"You must come and help me clear away the rubbish first," he said in a low voice, as he helped her in.

Sir Ethelred took the reins, and Bob seated himself by Joyce, bestowing a nod and a look upon Austin of such extreme sulkiness and defiance that it ought to have roused that gentleman's ire if he had seen

it, which he did not; and the carriage set off at a brisk pace, very unlike the one that it had kept before.

If Sir Ethelred had been looking forward to enjoying his drive with Joyce he must have experienced a considerable disappointment, for never during her residence at Charrington had Joyce been so short in her answers, or looked so much out of temper as she did now. She spoke as little as she could all the way home, and when they got to the Rectory, and Mrs. Hyde asked Sir Ethelred to come in to tea and let Bob drive round to his house, Joyce fairly ran upstairs and shut herself in her room.

When tea was ready, and she had to come into the drawing-room, she had rather repented of her rudeness, and was inclined to make it up with Sir Ethelred by resuming her usual manner with him ; and the response to her little overture was so

frank and hearty, and the pleasure in the visitor's face so genuine, that she was quite sorry for her temper, and doubly friendly and pleasant for the rest of the evening.

Sir Ethelred seemed in no hurry to go ; he stayed on chatting and laughing with the girls and their mother, and presently they went out into the garden and strolled about, and then he found an opportunity of speaking to Joyce unheard by the others.

“ I am afraid I vexed you to-day,” he said.

“ No, I wasn't vexed,” said Joyce, a little uneasily.

He had fastened his eyes upon her with the same look in them that had puzzled her once before.

“ I hope,” he said, bending over her and speaking very softly, “ that you don't find my company unpleasant to you.”

“ Oh dear no,” said Joyce, glad that he

had said something she really could respond to truthfully ; " I like your coming here very much."

" You do, really ?" he asked, with a little quiver in his voice that she had never heard there before.

" Cert'ly ; I do, really ; but don't you think we had better go on ?"

They were standing in a sort of little shrubbery at the end of the lawn, behind the acacia-tree and some rhododendrons. There was no one near them, and Joyce felt she could welcome one of the girls with pleasure ; there was something rather alarming to her in Sir Ethelred's manner, and in the way in which he replied :

" You make me very happy by saying that."

" I didn't mean to," said Joyce bluntly, turning and walking towards the house— " at least, I don't mean that, either ; but I

don't see that you need be made happy or miserable by anything of the sort."

" You are not angry with me," he said, overtaking her.

" Oh dear *no!*" cried Joyce, stamping her little foot. " Why on earth do you keep on like that? I am not vexed or pleased or anything else. I don't mean to be unkind," she added, seeing that he looked distressed; " of course I like to see you; you are always nice to me. Let's shake hands and make it up!"

He took her hand eagerly and held it tightly in his own. What he might have been going to say remains for ever unsaid, for at that moment Walter came round the shrubs to them.

Sir Ethelred dropped her hand, and both he and Joyce blushed and looked rather confused. Sir Ethelred was annoyed that he was interrupted on the brink of a tender

as Mrs. Hyde and the girls did. After dinner, Mrs. Hyde sat on the sofa in the drawing-room, and gave Joyce a long account of her eldest-born. He was from his birth the most wonderful child that had ever been created, could talk at an unnaturally early age, and learnt to read before other children could speak plainly. He was a miracle of cleverness, and used to astonish all about him by the precocity of his questions, and his great talents. At three he read fluently ; at four he was well acquainted with geography, and could discourse upon early heresies, being always of a most religious turn of mind ; at five he began Latin, and composed an English poem. When he went to school at eight he was placed in classes with boys of twelve. He won a good scholarship, and afterwards distinguished himself brilliantly at Oxford, where he took a first-class and a fellowship,

speech, and Joyce was vexed at the look of cold displeasure that showed itself instantly in Walter's face. Of there being any love-making in the case she was so far entirely ignorant, but she knew that Walter disapproved, and the old feeling of indignation rose up in her.

“Oh, you are come back!” she said coolly; “we have had such a nice day,” she added, as the two men shook hands in a very distant manner.

“Where is mamma?” asked Walter of Joyce.

“She is in the garden somewhere. I will go and find her,” and Joyce ran off.

The two men left behind walked to the house together, saying but little on the way, and directly afterwards Sir Ethelred took his leave.



CHAPTER III.

“**A**RE you ready for lessons, Walter?” asked Joyce of her cousin the next morning, after they came back from church. They usually sat in the dining-room to do them directly after the morning service.

“We will not have lessons this morning,” replied Walter, in his gravest manner.

“What a kind master you have, Joyce!” said Robert, in a tone intended to convey a sneer, but failing lamentably in its object. “You are actually going to have a holiday. How kind he is!”

“Why am I not to have lessons, Walter?
I have learnt them.”

“I have other things to attend to this morning,” he answered stiffly.

“Oh, very well, then ; I am sure I am not sorry,” she said, rather offended at his tone.
“Bob, shall we go for a walk ?”

“All right !” said Robert ; so away they went.

Walter waited in the hall until his mother came in with the Archdeacon ; the girls and he had walked on first. His father went into the study, and Mrs. Hyde, at his request, followed her son into the garden.

“I have something to say to you,” he began.

“Let us go to the top of the garden, then,” she said, “where we shall be out of everyone’s hearing. What is it about, Walter ? Has anything happened ?”

“I don’t know yet,” he answered ; “only

I think it is right to warn you and my father of what I believe to be going on."

"Oh dear! what can it be?"

Walter seated himself beside his mother in a little arbour before he answered her. They were quite at the end of the long garden, away from the house, in as quiet a place as could be desired.

"Do tell me, dear! what is it? I feel quite agitated," said Mrs. Hyde, glancing round her as she sat down. "Nobody can hear us here. We are quite safe."

"It is about Joyce," said her son.

"Oh, poor child! has she been getting into mischief? What shall we do with her? It is so very dreadful!"

"Last night," said Walter in his little precise way, as he nursed his leg thoughtfully, "I came into the garden, and just there where the shrubs are thickest, behind

the acacia-tree, I saw Joyce and Sir Ethelred Ashton standing."

" My dear Walter, they could not have been there a moment. I had only just gone to see if my sunflowers were coming up well."

" Then that makes the case rather worse, for when I saw them he had her hand in his and was bending over it ; and really, I believe he was going to kiss it when I came up."

" Oh, Walter, you don't really mean it!"

" I assure you I do, mamma ; and it has grieved me extremely to be obliged to mention it. You see, of course, that sort of thing does not do."

" Oh dear, of course not ! But, Walter love—perhaps—perhaps"—and Mrs. Hyde stopped and blushed—" perhaps," she hinted mildly, " he—Sir Ethelred, you know—has —has proposed !"

To her great surprise, her son took this suggestion in very ill part indeed, seemed positively annoyed, almost angry.

“Nonsense, mamma!” he said rather sharply; “how do you suppose such a thing?”

“Well, really, dear, I can hardly account for it, certainly, with Flo so near all the time. It was foolish of me, indeed, to say that, for nobody would look at Joyce with Flo beside her.”

“I am not so sure of that,” said her son, to her still greater surprise. “Joyce is pretty—decidedly pretty—and with careful training and education would make a very desirable person indeed. All she wants is training.”

“I always thought her nice looking, too,” said Mrs. Hyde, rather mystified by her son’s opinions; “but then she is not nearly so striking and distinguished-looking as

Flo or Eanswith ; she is much more like Blanche, being short—but then she is not so amiable."

"Blanche!" said her son in disgust, "Blanche is no more like Joyce than a milkmaid is like a fairy."

"Well, really, Walter," said poor Mrs. Hyde, "I did not expect to hear you compare your sister to a milkmaid ; and really, if Joyce is so charming as you think, I don't see after all why Sir Ethelred should not propose to her."

"Because he isn't good enough for her," said her son tartly. "I tell you, mamma, Joyce has splendid capabilities. She has all the makings of an extremely clever woman. She only requires development and careful training."

"Sir Ethelred not good enough for Joyce!" cried Mrs. Hyde in great astonishment ; "why, my dear Walter, there is not

a better family in the county, and we all know how nice he is ; and of course he is very well off."

"Sir Ethelred has no more brains than Bob has," returned her son ; "he knows absolutely nothing beyond his stable."

"Oh, my dear Walter, I am sure he is so very nice, and so good-natured and kind!"

"So he may be, but he would be a very unfit husband for Joyce. Joyce requires a great deal more than a handsome face and a good stable."

"Well, I am sure I don't know what more she could expect," cried Mrs. Hyde ; "the best match in all the neighbourhood ! But I really can hardly think it is true, Walter. I am afraid, dreadfully afraid," and Mrs. Hyde sank her voice to a whisper —"of course it's the fault of the poor dear child's training, but we all fear she is a little —just a little *fast*." Mrs. Hyde's voice

was almost inaudible at the end of this terrible communication.

Walter stroked his leg very thoughtfully for several seconds.

"I certainly do not understand why she allowed that fellow to hold her hand in that manner yesterday," he said. "It is difficult to make out what she can see in him."

"I don't think he can really mean anything," said Mrs. Hyde, shaking her head; "I have noticed how very attentive he is to Flo. It must be her."

"Anyhow, it was very improper," replied her son; "I certainly think you ought to speak to my father about it."

"Oh, but my dear, what can we do? We can't forbid him the house, you know. Really, I don't see what can be done."

"You can keep her away from him," said Walter, rising. "I think I shall give her

her lessons in the afternoons, as that is when he generally comes."

"Well, yes, perhaps that would be a good thing to do," said his mother, following him. "But, Walter, you don't really think there is anything in it; you know she is not *quite* like one of us. I am sure none of them would ever allow such a thing for a moment. We must not judge her too hardly, poor child! Remember her mother, Walter."

"It is Sir Ethelred whom I blame, not Joyce; though doubtless she is indiscreet. She requires training. Will you mention this to my father, or shall I?"

"Well, dear, I think if you don't mind—"

"Very well. By-the-way, it is not necessary to say anything to the girls, mamma;" and Walter walked into the house, leaving Mrs. Hyde in a very uneasy and fluttered state of mind.

Walter's communication with his father was not of so prolonged a nature as that with his mother. The Archdeacon received the account of his suspicions and observations with :

“ Eh, what ? Sir Ethelred attentive to Joyce ? Well, why not ? He would make her a very good husband. I know nothing whatever against him ; is most regular at church ; was speaking to me last week about joining the Church Union. Eh, what ? not fit for her ? Nonsense, my dear boy ! one of the best families in the county, and a most well-conducted young man. I am sure I hope it's true ;” and that was very small consolation to Walter.

With Mrs. Hyde matters were rather different. Kind as she was to her orphan niece, she was too devoted a mother to her own children to bear with equanimity a stranger's taking away from their very

midst the best match in the neighbourhood. In the vulgar sense of the word, Mrs. Hyde was as little of a match-maker as any woman could be ; but she naturally wished, as all women who love their husbands do wish, that her daughters should marry, and marry well ; and in her secret soul she had believed that Flo was the very wife for Sir Ethelred Ashton, and she had noticed with very great delight his frequent visits to the house, and his evident pleasure in the society of its inmates.

Until Walter had suggested the idea to her this morning, Joyce had never occurred to her as a possible rival, and even now she could not believe that she was so. Joyce was in her estimation in every way immeasurably inferior to her stately Flo. No man or woman in their senses would dream of looking at the one when the other was there. Walter's assurance to the contrary

had filled her with a vague uneasiness, but she did not believe it for all that ; the thing was too utterly absurd. Nevertheless she was pleased to see that for the next few days Walter carried out his design of giving Joyce her lessons in the afternoons.

As far as Joyce was concerned, when Walter told her that it would be more convenient for him to teach her in the afternoons, beyond wondering what had increased his grave formality, she gave no thought to the matter at all, and worked away at her tasks with redoubled vigour, feeling that any advancement in the acquisition of knowledge was likely to further cement the friendship between herself and Austin Leybourne.

But a move on Sir Ethelred's part, on which neither Walter nor his mother had ever calculated, threw out their plans very

much, and this was neither more nor less than Sir Ethelred's attending church every day. At first he merely happened to be talking to Robert after breakfast, and strolled down to the church with him—so he told the Archdeacon when he came out. The next day Robert had again something of importance to communicate to his friend in the early morning, and what more natural than that Sir Ethelred should again stroll down to the church? After that he made no further excuses, but generally overtook the family, or rather a detachment of it, on its way to service; and of course, as their roads lay together, he came back with them also.

It was quite natural also that Robert, who had quite made up his temporary quarrel with his cousin, should, as became a cousin, take her arm on these occasions, and, of course, his friend walked with them; and Flo, to whom for some unspecified reason

Robert was unusually civil and friendly about this time, was on Joyce's other side. What could be more natural, pleasant, and comfortable? So, at least, Mrs. Hyde thought, for Sir Ethelred walked, of course, beside Flo; so Sir Ethelred thought, for he was always very genial and pleasant; so Robert evidently thought, for he was brimming over with delight on these occasions; so Flo thought, for there was never a time in the course of her life when she looked softer or more gracious and pleasant than during these morning walks; and as for Joyce, to judge by her laughter and good spirits, she enjoyed herself amazingly in her present position.

But to Walter this daily walk and fun and merriment appeared far from desirable. He would often manœuvre to get Joyce away from the other three, or would keep the party all together and not suffer it to

break up into detachments ; and if, as was not uncommon, by the united efforts of Robert and Flo, who apparently had the same object in view for the first time in their lives, he was unsuccessful, he was a gloomy and silent man for the rest of the day, and a strict taskmaster over Joyce at her afternoon lessons.

About this time Joyce and Flo, after the manner of girls who are thrown much together, appeared to sink their differences and approach more nearly to a state of friendship than they had done before. To Joyce it seemed that some softening influence was at work upon her cousin. She was less sarcastic, less dogmatic, and more conversational and pleasant in her ways. She was decidedly friendly to Joyce, though still in rather a condescending and superior manner ; but Joyce was so delighted at any overtures from her relations

that she willingly responded to such offers as were made, and the two got on fairly well together—the better, perhaps, as they were totally unacquainted with each other's real thoughts and opinions.

Robert, too, for some curious reason of his own helped to cement the friendship. He left off teasing his sister, and constantly proposed that she should accompany Joyce and himself in some little walk or errand to the village or one of the neighbouring farms. As on these occasions they frequently met Sir Ethelred, who seemed to pass his entire existence in prowling about the fields and lanes in the neighbourhood, Flo was very willing to accompany them ; and though it generally happened that they all kept together and did not break up into twos, the walks were very pleasant ones to her for all that.

Flo was a proud girl, and a proud girl

naturally tries to hide her feelings ; but love was too strong for her, as it is for a good many people, proud or otherwise—for not all her fortitude could keep the blush of pleasure from rising to her face when she saw Sir Ethelred unexpectedly, or check the brightness in her eyes when he walked beside her and talked to her. Mothers and sisters are quick to see such things, and Mrs. Hyde and her elder daughters knew pretty accurately the state of Flo's mind towards their visitor ; but even among themselves they never spoke of it, or went beyond making the barest allusion to the subject. It was not a thing for them to talk about even with each other, so they were only doubly tender to the girl they had all tried to spoil ; and Eanswith and Blanche were constantly making some little addition to her wardrobe from their own rather scanty ones, for her adornment and

perfection. Joyce saw it of course, and that knowledge probably lay at the bottom of her new friendship with her cousin. A girl in love had something very attractive and rather awful about her to Joyce's childish eyes. She had never come in contact with such a person before, never seen anyone in that interesting state. It threw quite a halo of romance over her own life to be living beside her cousin who was going through such a wonderful experience. Joyce was almost reverential to her sometimes. She would no more have thought of chaffing her or teasing her on the subject than she would have thought of inflicting bodily torture upon anyone. Flo for the time was sacred in her eyes, a person to be wondered over, and tenderly treated, and allowed to have whims and fancies, and long day-dreams without interruption.

That Sir Ethelred felt precisely the same

emotions towards Flo as she did towards him, Joyce had not a shadow of doubt. Was he not constantly joining them in their walks ? Did he not talk to Flo more than to anyone else ? She often manœuvred in a quiet way to get them together, and she found that his eyes were constantly upon her afterwards as she flitted about (Joyce had a great objection to sitting still), of course in gratitude to her for so arranging matters for them. That he could possibly be in love with her never entered her wildest dreams ; indeed, she was so absorbed in watching the story she fancied she saw acting under her eyes, that it would have required a very strong and sharp awakening to convince her that her dream was false. Moreover she had a very delightful little affair of her own on hand just now, that, though only a friendship, was just as good in its way as Flo's romance.

This, of course, was her acquaintance with Austin Leybourne. Since that day at lunch, he had come several times to Charrington Rectory. There was something to be settled with the Archdeacon respecting the children of some of his tenants, who were going to move into Charrington parish, and whose schooling he wished to pay for. The Archdeacon was quite gratified by the interest Austin took in these children, and his desire that they should be admitted into the Sunday-school and choir. It gave him, he said to his wife, quite a different impression of Leybourne's character, and showed him to have been much maligned in the neighbourhood.

It was astonishing how often Austin had to come and see the Archdeacon about those cottagers, and how somehow he invariably drifted from the study to the drawing-room, and as invariably found himself

by Joyce's side. They had a good many long talks together—very interesting ones—in which he gradually unfolded to her the history of his discoveries.

It appeared that he had at an early period of his life taken to the study of astronomy, and when quite a young man had had the wildest dreams of the great things he would do, and the fame he would acquire. This was when he was at college, and he had earnestly besought his mother to allow him to devote his life to his engrossing study, and offered to leave the entire management of the property to her. But she would not hear of any such arrangement. She refused to allow him the moderate sum he required for his maintenance at Greenwich, where he wished to reside. This was before he was twenty-one, and by the time he had reached that age she had so worked upon his feelings as

to induce him to live with her ; at first as a temporary arrangement, but once settled at home, he never left it, but sank gradually into dreaminess and distrust of himself and his powers.

He fought against his life even now, Joyce could plainly see ; but he lacked the energy and decision necessary to rise superior to the difficulties that faced him. With his increased knowledge of his subject had also come that timidity so common among really learned men. He distrusted his own wisdom, and only longed to add to his store of knowledge, and not to disseminate it among others. There was a consciousness of suppressed power about him, too, that wonderfully fascinated the impulsive girl from the far West. He was like a man sunk under the influence of some dread narcotic that kept his strong limbs powerless, and laid his strength at rest. If

some influence could be found that was sufficiently strong to rouse him from this lethargy, and allow the full force of the man to be exerted, he might yet fulfil the promise of his youth. Perhaps it was the consciousness of this hidden strength of his ; perhaps pity for the weakness and indecision that was clouding him for the present ; perhaps it was mere sympathy with him in his lonely, wasted life that drew Joyce towards him. Whatever it was, something did attract her, and the happiest hours of her life were during his visits to Charrington Rectory.





CHAPTER IV.

NONE morning Lady Ashton came to call at the Rectory. She had been away visiting a good deal lately, but was shortly, she said, going to settle at the Court for a few months. Joyce had never seen her before, for she had generally slipped away from the presence of visitors at the Rectory ; but this time Lady Ashton met her as she was going into the drawing-room.

“Don’t go away, my dear,” she said, holding the girl’s hand in hers, while she gave a prolonged and rather searching look at her face. “I rather wanted to see you.

Ethelred has scarcely talked of anyone else lately. Come in, child, and let me look at you," she added, with a little tap on the girl's shoulder.

Joyce, not quite certain whether she liked Lady Ashton's free and easy manner or not, followed her into the room, and stood beside her.

"Sit down, and let us have a little talk," said Lady Ashton. "Don't look frightened, child; I am not going to examine you in your verbs. Though I don't know why I should suppose you detested verbs as I did when a child; but verbs were the bane of my existence. Well, and what do you think of England, and your relations, and everything here?"

"I like it better now than I did at first," said Joyce. "I am getting more used to things."

"Ah, yes, of course; it must have been

strange to you at first. Not but what rather like things to be strange sometimes one gets so awfully bored, you know."

"I don't know," said Joyce ; "I have never been bored in my life. Oh yes, but have though, since I came to Charrington.

"On Sundays?" asked Lady Ashton with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Well, yes," said Joyce hesitatingly "you see I am not used to sermons especially two sermons, and three services and Sunday-school, and family prayers."

"Precisely," laughed her ladyship ; "but you droll child, if you were used to it you would be twenty times more bored. Look at me, I go to church every Sunday, regularly, and I am always insufferably bored. Now tell me, how long has Ethelred taken to go to church every day? I know he never used to do so."

"Only for the last week, or perhaps for

night," said Joyce, annoyed to feel herself blushing under Lady Ashton's amused glance.

"Only about a fortnight, and to what do you attribute his sudden conversion? You won't answer, you sly little puss! Well, I think I can tell; and I don't know that on the whole I object, I am sure. Who taught you to do your hair in that very becoming way, child?"

"Oh, nobody taught me!" said Joyce, glad that the conversation was straying away from Sir Ethelred; "I just roll it up and it comes so."

"Well, there are very few maids who could make it 'come so.' If you take my advice you will never let a maid touch your hair. Nothing could improve upon that. Now you will wear it like that at the garden-party next week, will you not?"

"Certainly," said Joyce, pleased to be

praised even for dressing her hair. Si began to think that she liked this pleasant-faced well-dressed youthful mother of Si Ethelred's. She could scarcely realise that she was his mother, for she did not look a day older than thirty, and her dress set off the youthfulness of her face and figure to its fullest extent. She was a fair woman of a rather large type, with fine hands and arms and a great development of bust and neck. She had a wonderfully fair complexion, so fair that it gave the least possible impression of having been heightened by art; luxurious golden hair worn low over her forehead in numberless little curls, and large deep blue eyes. Altogether she was a very fine handsome woman with a cheerful and rather loud voice, free manners, and a hearty laugh. If she had not been so thoroughly well-bred she would have been vulgar, but even her worst enemies—and

she had several—never said that of her. She had a friendly protecting air towards Joyce; not exactly a motherly air, but rather that of an elder sister or patroness. She laid her hand now on Joyce's, and said :

“ Now, my dear, you must not think me a meddlesome, inquisitive creature, but I should like to know what you are going to wear at my party. You see you are a mite of a child yet, and I am quite an old woman—oh yes, I am old enough to be your mother. And I want you to look your best, of course; and you may take my word for it, my dear, no woman is so pretty that she can afford to despise dress ! Now what have you ?”

“ It's very kind of you to ask,” said Joyce, feeling quite grateful; “ do you think a blue, very pale blue cachemire trimmed with lace would do ?”

“ It all depends on the make, my dear. A mere rag made by a good dressmaker is

superior to a silk made in the country.
Now tell me, who made it?"

"I bought it at Allman's, in Regent Street," replied Joyce ; "they said it was a pattern-dress from Paris."

"My dear child, that is quite sufficient ; you can trust Allman's, they never keep an inferior article. You will look charming—quite charming. Now mind you put some white roses at your throat—you can wear white so well. Oh, here is Mrs. Hyde. My dear, how are you ? it is ages since I saw you ; and how good you have been to my boy ! He seems to have lived here."

"We have been so pleased to have him here," said Mrs. Hyde.

"So good of you to say so ; and I am sure I don't wonder at his preferring all your young people to being by himself. By the way, how charming your niece is ! where is she ? Oh, out in the garden ; and I

declare there are Ethelred and Flo! What a tall girl she is!"

"They are just of the same height, I think," said Mrs. Hyde with a shy embarrassed air. It was almost like saying something decided, but Lady Ashton's manner had been rather pointed from the beginning.

"Yes, you must get her well married," said her ladyship; "she will look well at the head of a table."

"She evidently has heard something," thought the delighted mother; "dear Flo, how happy we shall be!" Before she had time to say anything more the Archdeacon came in, and the conversation wandered to other subjects.

Directly Lady Ashton was gone, Mrs. Hyde sought Walter; she found him in his room, reading.

"Oh, Walter, I am sure I was right in

what I said the other day—you know when. Lady Ashton has been here, and really her manner was quite pointed. They both came on the lawn when she was here, and she said something—I hardly remember what it was, but it was about Flo's getting married ; what do you think of that ? I believe she came on purpose ;" and Mrs. Hyde hurried away to go and talk to "papa" on the subject.

Lady Ashton's pony-carriage had been in waiting for her, and she drove away from the Rectory towards Charrington village ; on her way she passed two elderly maiden ladies who were picking their way along the dirty lane.

"Who are they ?" she asked the man who sat behind her.

"The Miss Sacketts, my lady."

She stopped the carriage and looked round ; they were close behind.

“How do you do?” she said. “Hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you on Wednesday.”

“I am sure your ladyship is most kind,” began Miss Sackett, all in a tremble at such notice from the grand lady of the district.

“So very condescending,” murmured Miss Mary; “and I am sure nothing could give us so much pleasure.”

“And so very thoughtful of Sir Ethelred, for I am sure we couldn’t expect any such notice.”

“Quite beyond a dream,” said Miss Mary again; “I declare it quite upset us; and your ladyship so kind too.”

“Glad you will come,” said Lady Ashton, smiling and nodding good-bye, and she drove on again.

“There, I am sure I have done my duty now!” she thought to herself. “Really, if Ethelred was going to stand for the county

I couldn't have taken more trouble over it. But what could have possessed her to want those two curious old creatures at a garden-party ! I trust she is not philanthropic, for people with that craze always choose the most disagreeable of one's fellow-creatures to be kind to. I must cure her of that if she is ; but of course she knows nothing of society yet. I am *thankful* she is not the blowsy country beauty I feared she might be when I heard where she came from. She is really lovely ; and so refined and well-bred in appearance. She will soon lose her uncouth plainness of speech, not but what that sort of thing goes down very well now. I always told Ethelred he should choose for himself, and it is a comfort that it is over, for I have lived in terror of a governess for years ;" and Lady Ashton drove on to Moulbury in a fairly satisfied frame of mind.

To attempt to describe the flutter and agitation of the Miss Sacketts' minds since the receipt of Lady Ashton's invitation would be a difficult task. Sir Ethelred brought it himself one Wednesday afternoon when he knew by experience that Mrs. Hyde and the girls would visit the schools and probably drink tea with the Miss Sacketts afterwards. On this occasion he was rewarded by the presence of Joyce, Flo, and Blanche, who had accompanied Mrs. Hyde. He had unfortunately delivered the invitation before they came in, and its effects were such that the Miss Sacketts made a series of the most ludicrous mistakes in their tea-making arrangements —putting the milk into the kettle, and the tea into the cream-jug in their agitation of mind. But he was rewarded by a glance from Joyce's bright eyes, and knew that he had pleased her by what he had done.

Since then the Miss Sacketts had been in a chronic state of excitement, so much so that Mrs. Frederick Sackett, their brother's wife, who lived at a farmhouse in the village, remarked to her husband that since Martha and Mary had wormed themselves into the society of their betters they had put on such airs, that she for her part could only despise them, and thank Providence she was content to remain in the state of life to which she was called. This was hard upon the two gentle old ladies, for certainly their highest social ambition had been the condescending notice of the Rectory people, and with them they had never aspired to visit on terms of equality. Their greatness had indeed been thrust upon them, and never were recipients of favours more bewildered and grateful than the two Miss Sacketts by this condescension on the part of the Ashtons. Yet, in spite

of their feeling flattered and pleased by such notice, there was a very sturdy yeoman farmer's pride at the bottom of all this flutter of spirits. Had Sir Ethelred Ashton attempted any patronising airs, which he never dreamt of doing, or taken any liberties in their house, they would have made him feel tolerably quickly that their position in their own eyes was just as good as his in its way ; so their sister-in-law's remarks were decidedly the reverse of the truth.

That afternoon they had been going to call at the Rectory, but seeing Lady Ashton's carriage before the door they had walked on. Now, however, they turned back and went there.

“ My dear Mrs. Hyde, so glad to find you in. And who do you think stopped to speak to us just now ? ”

“ Actually called back to us ! and how she knew us I am sure I can't tell, though

Sir Ethelred of course is almost, I may say, intimate."

"So kindly drops in to tea, you know, as you have often met him, the most delightful young man, though of course not so clever as Mr. Walter, but so very charming!"

"And of course it must have come through him, for how should her ladyship know us else? but still so very kind."

"Quite very," said Miss Sackett; and here both ladies stopped for want of breath, having taken up each other's remarks without pausing.

"She has just been here too," said Mrs. Hyde, her motherly face beaming with delight; "and I mustn't, of course, say a word, as nothing is settled yet; but both papa and I think it is so very likely, and I am sure you will be as delighted as we are——"

"Oh dear, now, what is it?" cried both

the ladies at once, and Miss Martha added :

“ I shouldn’t wonder if it is what has been in our minds for ever so long, and no wonder, I am sure, with young people, and such attractions.”

“ And so suitable in every way,” chimed in Miss Mary ; “ but of course not a word, only one has eyes of course, and so very obvious, and all I can say is nothing could be more so.”

“ Hush ! not a word,” said Mrs. Hyde, fairly brimming over with delight ; “ but, as you say, I think it *has* been a little obvious.”

“ From the very first ; and I am sure I don’t wonder at it, so much beauty and so distinguished-looking.”

“ So amiable and so suitable in every way on both sides. I am sure nothing could be more so.”

“ She did notice something about—about



the same height," said Mrs. Hyde, looking mysterious, and her eyes dancing like a girl's.

" Of course, and the same thing that we have noticed scores of times, though of course never mentioned it to any beside ourselves."

" Would never think of doing such a thing, but could not help seeing it of course, and then everything so suitable, but not a word at present."

" Oh dear no, not a syllable," cried Mrs. Hyde. " I wouldn't for the world the dear girl should get talked about. I know I can trust you ; but not a word more."

" There they are now, I declare it makes one quite excited, I am sure I never was so pleased at anything !" cried Miss Sackett, looking out of the window.

" Dear Flo !" said Miss Mary.

" Darling child !" murmured Mrs. Hyde.



CHAPTER V.

HE day of the garden-party dawned brightly. Joyce was out of bed at four o'clock to see if the sun had risen properly ; and though she went back to bed again, she was unable to go to sleep for excitement.

The Hyde girls took it more quietly, but Flo was unusually eager, and showed a strange tendency to fall into long day-dreams, and manifested extreme anxiety about the fit of a new dress that had been ordered for the occasion, and on which Blanche and Eanswith had concentrated their supremest efforts in the way of making,

Joyce good-naturedly offering her “ Paris blue” for a pattern.

The morning was a terribly long one to both the girls. They went to church as usual, but no Sir Ethelred was there, and they walked home by the village by way of prolonging the distance. As they were passing the little shop at the corner, where everything from bacon to needles, garden seeds, nails, and children’s toys, were sold, Joyce saw a grey mare standing before the door, the sight of which made her heart beat. She lingered a little before they turned the corner, under pretence of speaking to some child, and just then Austin Leybourne came out. He saw them at once, and instead of mounting the mare, drew the bridle through his arm and walked to them.

“ I am glad to have met you,” he said to Joyce, after having shaken hands with them both. “ I wanted to know if you were going

to this garden-party at Ashton Court this afternoon."

"Oh yes, of course we are!" cried Joyce, looking up at him with a sudden fear in her grey eyes. "Why, Sir Ethelred got it up for us! You are going, are you not?"

"I was uncertain about it. You see, I do not go out, and never give parties."

"Oh, but do come! Why, I told Sir Ethelred to be sure to ask you!" said Joyce in an aggrieved tone.

He smiled and looked down on her pleading face.

"That accounts for my receiving an invitation, then; and that settles it. Of course I will come if you wish me to."

"No, I don't a bit if you are going to be like this," said Joyce, pouting a little. "I thought you would enjoy it ever so much —as we all shall. You needn't come to oblige me!"

“ Oh, I don’t, I assure you,” he said in the bantering tone he used towards her sometimes ; “ but I shall have to change my clothes, and you know that is against the principles of a hermit.”

“ It’s ridiculous to affect to be a hermit.”

“ I agree with you entirely. All affectation is ridiculous, but no reality is. Now I really am a hermit ; doesn’t a hermit mean a person who renounces the world, and lives a solitary life ? and I do that ; but I will come to this party.”

“ What have you been doing lately ?” she asked him, as she walked beside the mare and patted her neck.

“ Dawdled about just as usual, after having made some feeble attempts to reduce my papers into something like order. I worked for two hours, and by the end of that time it was impossible to find anything ; so I tore what little hair I had,

locked the door, and have had serious thoughts of throwing the key into the dyke, and thus laying the foundations for a haunted room. How many years do you give it to get that reputation?"

"I call it wrong of you even to talk like that," said Joyce, very seriously. "You *ought* to do your work."

"You are so terribly in earnest over everything," he said, looking at her over his mare's neck. Though he spoke lightly his eyes had an earnestness in their gaze that would have alarmed her had she seen them. They looked as though the very life of their owner was at some crisis of its fate.

"So you *ought* to be," she said, "you have something to be earnest about; I have nothing but foolish little things. I only wish I had some real big thing to do; wouldn't I go through with it and carry it out!" and she raised her eyes to him.

He looked away quickly.

“What sort of thing would you like to do?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Something really hard and difficult ; I should like to have something to look forward to very hard. I should hate to have things all smooth and easy for me, and nothing to do for myself ; I would rather make my life than let other people fix it for me, like a dress-maker does with one’s clothes.”

“Would you like helping other people with their lives ?”

“Yes, if I could ; but I guess I don’t know enough for that : you see I couldn’t give good advice.”

“You give me plenty.”

“It can’t be very good if you don’t do anything with it,” she answered quickly. “Anything that fails can’t be particularly good.”

"So you believe only in success?"

"I believe some people waste themselves," said Joyce severely, "and you are one of them. You had better go straight home and begin to fix up those papers before going to the party. You will have lots of time, and then you can tell me how much you have done. Now, good-bye."

"You hard little task-mistress! I tell you I haven't courage so much as to enter that room again."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself; good-bye."

"Won't you come and help me?" he said, still holding her hand; "some day I mean, not now. I think I could do them if you were there."

She stood still with her hand in his. Flo had walked on a little way, and now stood waiting for her at the stile that led into the fields at the back of the Rectory.

She blushed a little and tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it fast.

“Would you like to help me?” he asked again in a low voice, the tone of which sent something leaping through her veins. It frightened her, and she pulled her hand away.

“Good-bye,” she said, and ran to Flo; then stopped and called out to him as he stood beside his mare looking after her, “Mind you come this afternoon.”

“What did he keep you talking so for?” asked Flo; “I think he is a very tiresome sort of man. I never can understand him.”

“He isn’t tiresome a bit; he is very nice, and very clever,” said Joyce, the blood rushing into her face, and speaking very quickly and excitedly: “cleverer than Walter, and ten thousand times cleverer than”—she was about to say “Sir Ethelred,” but stopped herself in time and sub-

stituted rather lamely, "than most people are."

"Well, I don't care for him," said Flo, and they walked on in silence.

The afternoon was as bright and warm as could be desired. The great trees on the lawn at Ashton Court cast grateful shadows on the turf underneath, while a gentle breeze stirred the leaves overhead and prevented the air from feeling sultry. There was a large lawn at Ashton Court of a straggling uneven nature in the distance, but level enough near the house for purposes of lawn-tennis. There were a good many trees about, and a shrubbery on one side of the house with a pond in it, and a miniature boat-house and summer-house beside it. There were water-lilies in the pond, and rose-bushes overhanging it, and the beds before the house were bright with geraniums and summer flowering plants.

Everything about the place was well kept and orderly, and the house itself was prim and ugly in its glaring whiteness, though luxurious and comfortable within.

To-day the garden looked at its best, with the groups of gaily-dressed ladies and flannel-clothed lawn-tennis players standing on the soft turf, or strolling down the walks among the leaves of the dark shrubs. It was a gay, pleasant, bright scene, and Lady Ashton and her son were the most genial and pleasant of hosts. All present looked and felt at their ease, and even the Miss Sacketts, unused as they were to entertainments of this sort, had not been there ten minutes before they began to enjoy themselves completely.

Lady Ashton, in a pale green dress and a darker velvet bonnet that well set off the luxuriance of her golden hair, came up to the Hyde party as they entered and saluted

them cordially, and led the girls away to a group of tennis-players who were making up their sets, saying as she did so, to Joyce:

“ My dear, you were quite right about your dress—it is charming. I am so glad you told me you were going to wear *pale* blue, because otherwise I should have worn a blue dress of the very shade that would have killed yours. You have not forgotten the roses, I see. Ah, here is Ethelred: he will take care of you ;” and Lady Ashton went back to her other guests.

“ Do you see,” whispered Mrs. Hyde to her husband, “ Lady Ashton has taken the girls herself up to her son. I don’t know what could be more pointed than that, I am sure.”

“ Well, well, my dear, we will hope so. I am sure I shall be very well pleased if it is ; but all you women are match-makers. Lady Emmeline, I am delighted to see you.

Ha ! ha ! and this is never your son—well, well, indeed !” and there was an end of matrimonial confidences for the time.

Meanwhile the girls, in company with a good many other young people, were arranging the sets for lawn-tennis. Sir Ethelred did not play, there being, of course, but a limited number of games ; and though Flo was immediately engaged in a set, as were also her sisters, it somehow fell out that Joyce did not find a place. It is possible that this state of things was neither unlooked-for nor displeasing to Sir Ethelred, for when the others all moved off to the scene of their future exploits, he said to her :

“ You would just as soon see the conservatory, would you not, as play with all those people you don’t know ?”

“ Yes, I would rather,” said Joyce, feeling that a pattern dress from Paris, made

in the then prevailing fashion of tight skirts, was not precisely the best costume for playing lawn-tennis in. She glanced at her skirts as she replied, and her companion saw the look and laughed.

“It’s very pretty,” he said, “but not quite the thing for tennis, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” said Joyce, “and I only hope Flo won’t split hers. It’s as tight as mine;” and she looked anxiously back towards the tennis-courts.

But her companion did not seem to be interested in Flo’s dress or her playing, for he hurried Joyce on, saying :

“I don’t know when I shall have time to show you here quietly again. Everybody is here now, and I have done my duty all round; but by-and-by they will get tired of watching the tennis, and will want to walk about;” and so saying he led the way round the house to the conservatory.

It was a large building with a raised centre-stand of flowers and a walk round it, so that persons on one side were not visible from the other. It was well filled with flowers and ferns, several of which Joyce recognised as familiar to her in the woods of California.

But neither did Sir Ethelred seem particularly interested in the flowers. He was silent and abstracted to a degree very unusual with him, and Joyce finding him so became silent too, and reflected that garden-parties were after all not quite such delightful things as she had fancied.

Presently, with a sort of jerk Sir Ethelred flung himself into a speech.

“I—I am so delighted you came to-day,” he said. “You don’t know how I have been looking forward to this day, Miss Joyce.”

“Oh, so have I!” said Joyce, brighten-

ing up again; "I think a party is such fun. You know I never was at one before."

"No, really. Perhaps," with a desperate effort, "you would rather go back and look at the people now."

"Well, I think I would," said Joyce. "You see, I can see you any day, and I have never seen so many English people together before," she added, observing that he looked pained.

"Then you prefer other people's society to mine?" he asked her in a dismal voice, as he moved towards the door.

"No, I don't," said Joyce. "How should I when all these people are strangers, and you have been so kind to me! I tell you what we will do. You shall come and sit by me under that tree—there are two chairs there—and tell me who everybody is, will you?"

"With pleasure!" he cried, and they went out together.

"Well, of all the barefaced creatures that ever I heard of, that girl is the most astounding!" said Mrs. Johnstone to herself, coming from the other side of the bank of flowers to the door and watching them: "actually asked him to come and sit there with her in the most exposed place in the garden! The artful hussy! in the face of his mother, too. Of course everybody will say they are engaged! I wonder how she got him away here the very first thing! I never saw anything so artful in all my life!" and the amiable lady stationed herself where she could command a good view of the guilty pair.

"I declare it's quite sickening, the familiarity she has with him!" exclaimed Mrs. Johnstone to herself. "How she laughs and looks up at him! She is trying

to make him believe he is funny, and—well, I never ! I declare she is actually going to play off that stick Austin Leybourne against him. She must have taken him in finely to make him think he had a chance, with his tumble-down old place, against this house and a title and money ; but the artfulness of the girl ! I declare she is talking to them both. I will stand it no longer. I will call Ethelred away myself ;" and Mrs. Johnstone sallied forth. But she was too late ; a young tennis-player, one of Sir Ethelred's friends, had come up apparently about some point in the game, and they walked away together.

"Well, at any rate *he* is out of her reach!" said Mrs. Johnstone to herself, as she went to speak to some of her friends.

" You see I have fulfilled one part of my promise," Austin Leybourne said to Joyce, as he took Sir Ethelred's vacant

chair. "What am I to have for my reward?"

"Have you fulfilled the other part?" she asked him.

He looked at her steadily for a few moments while he pulled his moustache. There was a strange intensity in his dark eyes that she had never noticed there before, and it made her cast her own down, and she pulled to pieces a flower she held in her hand.

"No, I have not," he said slowly. "I went straight there, as you told me. I opened the door and looked in. I even went so far as to take up a diagram and look at it. But I could not get any further. I have not the moral courage to do it. I want some real object in the future to pull me through my present. I can't do it else."

"You will have the fame," she said, with her eyes still down.

“What do I care for fame? What will fame do for a man who has wasted his youth, and is eating his heart out in despair?”

The words frightened her, still more the tone in which they were said. She kept her eyes still down, and played with the shreds of the flower she had destroyed.

“Don’t do that,” he said, looking at her moving fingers. “I can’t bear to see anything destroyed, still less to see you do it. It opens up such awful possibilities.”

She gathered the petals together and laid her hands over them.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

“If you were older and more experienced in the ways of this wicked world you would,” he said, with something of his gentle bantering in his voice. “But then probably I should not have said it. You are no more than a child, you know, Joyce”

—it was the first time he had ever calle
her by her Christian name, but he did no
appear to notice it—“in spite of your fee
ing so aged.”

“I am not much younger than Flo.
don’t see why everybody should treat m
as a child,” pouted Joyce.

“Because, little friend, you are one i
heart,” he said playfully, with his forme
gloomy earnestness apparently quite fo
gotten, “else how would you be simpl
enough to be friends with a wretched ol
hulk like I am, instead of preferring th
society of a pleasant, handsome your
fellow like Sir Ethelred? You are a chil
or else how should I see in your eyes th
you were pleased for me to come to yo
when he was with you? I am not wrong
am I? You were pleased?”

“Yes, I was glad for you to come,” sh
answered simply, lifting her clear hone

eyes to his. "He is very nice and very kind, but you are my real friend."

"Thank you," he said, so very earnestly that he again awed her into silence. After a pause he asked :

"You talked this morning of wanting something to do—something very hard and difficult. Did you mean what you said?"

"Certainly," said Joyce. "I always mean what I say. Do you know anything that I can do?"

"I know one thing that you can do, and nobody else can do," he replied, bending a little towards her and speaking in very low tones ; "but this is not quite the time or place to tell you. Do you think you can undertake it?" he added, looking into her eyes.

"I don't know what it is," she said, dropping her own, while she felt a hot flush

of colour pass over her face. "I guess if it is something you want me to do I shall like it. Is it *very* difficult?"

"Not, I hope, for you. It would be impossible for anybody else."

"Well, I can't guess a bit," she said, shaking her head. "When will you tell me about it?"

"When I think you will do it, if ever I do."

"It's mean of you to doubt me."

"Oh no, it isn't. It would be meaner of me not to feel such very considerable doubts on the subject that I don't know if I shall ever even let you know about it."

"Is it about your work?"

"Don't ask me any more questions, little friend, or I shall be obliged to tell you on the spot; and I don't want to do that. If you will wear such a bewitching hat and feathers, and such an elegant costume direct

from Paris, you reduce us poor country people into so abject a state of admiration that you take us at an unfair advantage. I protest against that bunch of roses at your throat. It makes you positively dangerous. If you don't reduce its dimensions by giving me one of them, I shall consider that you came here with the fell and wicked purpose of enslaving young Ashton. Give me one of them directly!"

"Lady Ashton told me to wear them," she said, with a half-saucy, half-deprecating look in her sweet eyes."

"Then I know I am right. Good-afternoon, Miss Hyde;" and he rose to go.

"No, don't. You shall have one," she said. "But you really have been talking the most dreadful nonsense;" and she handed him one of her white roses.

"No, I am not going to have that," he said. "It's very pretty, but it is an outside

one. I want that little half-blown one that is touching your neck. It is beginning to fade already."

"I don't care which you have," said Joyce, "only I don't wan't to look untidy. There! I will take them all out, and you shall choose."

"No, you give me that little one yourself."

"Well, here it is," and she gave it him.

He took it from her very gravely, and drawing a pocket-book from his breast-pocket, placed the flower carefully within it, and restored the book to its place.

"There," he said, "that is a memento of this talk of ours to-day. Some day, perhaps, I shall show you that little rose again, and remind you of to-day. Some day when you are grown into a woman."

"I *am* a woman. Why do you always make me to be so young?" she cried, a

little impatiently. As she looked at him she saw a change come over his face, a wild light into his eyes, and he looked as though some great passion swept over him. She had never seen him look so handsome or so powerful as in that moment. His melancholy listlessness was gone and his whole attitude changed, but it was only for the briefest moment; the old wistful pathos came back into his eyes, the lines re-ruled themselves upon his brow, and his face and figure fell into their former purposelessness.

“ If only you could always remain what you are now,” he said, as they both rose from their chairs. “ Little friend, if I did not know that that was impossible, I should dare to do what I do not dare even to think of now.”

By one consent, though no word was spoken of it, they both knew that their interview had come to its end. She made

no answer to him, and they walked in silence towards the tennis-players. Some games were just over, and there was much merry laughing and talking, in the midst of which Joyce found Sir Ethelred at her side, and Austin Leybourne had vanished.

She was feeling a good deal shaken by her late conversation. In some unexplained manner she felt that it had a deeper bearing on herself and her life than anything that had ever happened to her. She felt utterly unfit for the light laughter and gay conversation of those about her ; she longed to get away and think, or rather to fold her hands and let her fancy bring back again the tones of Austin's voice as he sat half whispering to her under the murmuring trees. In a vague indefinite way she felt that something had happened, she did not know what, only that it was something for herself alone.



Outwardly she was only a little graver than usual, but there was a deep shining in her eyes, and a heightened flush on her cheeks that added wonderfully to her beauty. After a little while the excitement that she laboured under had no other choice than to manifest itself in an added gaiety to her voice and manner. The first desire for loneliness and quietness wore off, and in its place came a reaction. In a short time she found herself the centre of a group of young people, mostly young men, and some very young girls, all of whom were laughing heartily at her witty answers and bright remarks.

Her spirits rose as her popularity increased. It was impossible to resist the pleasurable feeling of being the centre of admiration. It had never happened to Joyce before to be conscious of attractiveness, but now she could not avoid seeing

her position. She was almost like a little queen holding a court, her admirers were so devoted and agreeable. She could not help noticing, too, that the Hyde girls, in company with some rather elderly damsels, were left pretty much to themselves, and the glances that were cast upon her from their quarter were certainly the reverse of agreeable. It seemed as though all the young men present were clustered round her chair, and vying with each other who should get the most conversation with her. Joyce would have been less than woman had she enjoyed her triumph less, but she would have been a different woman to what she was had she found any pleasure in her cousins' disappointment.

“Look,” she said to Sir Ethelred, who had kept up a jealous position at her right hand, and appeared to be filled with some strangely gloomy thoughts as he noticed

devotee after devotee before her, "See, there is Flo walking with that Miss Brown: I am sure she would rather be here—do fetch her."

"Do you want me to go away?" he said, bending over her.

"I want you to bring her here; and I am sure Eanswith and Blanche don't care a bit for those girls from Moulbury. Make them all come here together under these trees, and then we can have ices: I see they are bringing them out. Do go."

"You will let me come back again?" he said.

"Of course. I want you to get me an ice."

"An ice—allow me!" cried a dozen voices about her, and one or two of the more enthusiastic had already started.

"No, no," she cried; "Sir Ethelred has promised me these ices for ever so long."

He will get me one. You all go and get all the girls here together, and we will have a picnic with ices."

In a few moments all the young members of the party were in the same group, while the footmen handed trays about containing various sorts of ices and delicate cakes. Sir Ethelred, in virtue of bringing Joyce her ice, had adroitly slipped into his place again, from which he had been dislodged by a stalwart young Oxonian in white flannels.

In the midst of their laughing and talking Lady Ashton, who had been attending to her elder guests, came to the group under the lime-trees.

"Can you find room for an old woman among you?" she cried, as she came to them.

"Where is my little American friend? Thank you, Ethelred," as her son gave her his chair. "Well, my dear," to Joyce, "have you the right sort of ices? Ethelred



was most particular in ordering them, I assure you. You Americans live on ices, don't you?"

"Oh, I never had any so good as these in America," cried Joyce. "In fact, I never had any except when we went down to San Francisco. Father and I were generally in the woods."

"Well, I am glad you find something better in England than in America!" said Lady Ashton, with one of her bright smiles and an arch look which made Joyce blush, though she did not know what for. The blush did not fade away the quicker for Lady Ashton's rising and saying she would not keep Ethelred out of his place, or for the momentary silence that followed this little speech, while most of those present glanced at each other in a meaning manner that made Joyce hotter than ever. She wondered what they looked

at her so far, and began to fear she had said something she ought not, especially as she caught sight of Blanche's horrified gaze. But a few words from Sir Ethelred sent the laughter and conversation flying faster than ever, and she soon forgot her momentary discomfiture.

Presently the party broke up, and began to wander about in little twos and threes; and Joyce, noticing that Flo looked pale and agitated, went up to her, and putting her arm in hers, suggested they should go and look at the pond.

To her intense surprise Flo snatched her arm away from her cousin, and fixing on her a look pallid with passion, dared her to come near her. She could say no more, for Walter and the young Oxonian came up at that moment.

"I have been wanting you, Joyce," said Walter. "Come and look at the shrubbery with me."

Speechless with amazement, Joyce walked off beside him.

“What has happened to Flo?” she gasped out at last.

“Can you not guess?” he said, looking at her very gravely.

“I haven’t the slightest idea!” she cried distressfully. “Why, she was as nice as possible coming here, and I haven’t spoken to her since. Oh, Walter, what can it be!”

“Florence expresses her feeling rather too vehemently,” said Walter, walking gravely beside her; “but I cannot avoid saying, Joyce, that to a certain extent I must share her sentiments.”

“You! Why, what have I done to you?” she asked, feeling decidedly exasperated by his tone and manner.

“Nothing directly, a good deal indirectly,” he answered. “Joyce, you must certainly be aware, undisciplined as you are, that the

way you have been encouraging young Ashton's attentions is far from creditable to yourself or your feelings as a modest girl!"

"I! Encourage Sir Ethelred! Walter, you are mad!"

"Not at present, certainly. I repeat it, Joyce, your conduct does not do you credit."

"How dare you speak so to me!" she cried, turning upon him and stamping her foot. They were fortunately in a retired part of the garden, and no one was near them. "My conduct improper! If anybody's conduct is not creditable it is Flo's and yours for daring to even think such a thing of me!" and Joyce flashed round upon him in a little fury of rage.

"I am sorry to observe such a display of feeling, Joyce," returned her cousin; "but I cannot go back from what I have said. You have encouraged Sir Ethelred, and you have been doing so to-day."

"I have not!" she retorted. "I never thought of such a thing, and I am sure he never has either, and it is only mean suspicious people like yourself who would!"

"Thank you," he said. "Perhaps you did not notice Lady Ashton's little speech, or the impression it produced."

"She didn't seem to object to me, anyhow," said Joyce. "If she did mean anything—which I don't believe she did—she didn't insinuate anything horrid about me, which you have done!"

"Am I to understand then that you like this young man's attentions?"

"Yes, I do, ten thousand times better than yours, if this is a sample of them," said Joyce, in a white heat. "I don't know what you are talking to me like this for, but I can tell you I like *his* talking a great deal better, and his company too."

"That is sufficient for the present," he

said. "I shall not consider anything that you say in your present temper as worthy of remembrance. In a few days I will have another conversation with you, when I hope you will be calmer."

"You had better not!" said Joyce, scarcely able to contain herself, "or you will hear something you won't like."

"Such childish threats are silly," he remarked.

"They may be; but if I am silly, I don't go around showing I am in love with a man before all the world, like Flo does," she added, in the extremity of her wrath.

It was an unkind speech, and she could have bitten her tongue as soon as she made it and saw how set Walter's face became.

"At least," he said very slowly, "you might learn to respect a feeling it appears you are incapable of understanding;" and

without another word he turned away and left her.

Left alone, her passion forsook her, and she trembled so violently that she had to lean against a tree. It was with great difficulty that she could keep down her tears, but her pride helped her, and she gulped down a rising sob.

“I won’t let him see that I care for his scolding,” she said to herself; and then she saw Sir Ethelred close beside her.

“I have been looking everywhere for you,” he said. “Who brought you here? Why, what is the matter?” his voice was so full of alarm that it gave her courage to smile.

“Nothing,” she said; “at least, Walter and I have had a little quarrel—that is all.”

“Walter and you!” he cried; then, coming closer, “He hasn’t been making love to you, has he?”

She looked at him in such utter amazement that he could only think that he had offended her.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I ought not to have asked you such a thing.”

“But how could you ever think it?” she cried, crimson with shame; then, at the recollection of Walter’s prim face and set little manner, the comicality of his making love to her amused her so much that she broke into a ringing laugh.

“Oh, how could you fancy anything so funny?” she cried. “If you had only seen how quiet and prim he was, and how he lectured me! It’s the funniest thing in the world!” she added, drying the tears that her laughter had forced into her eyes.

Her companion was very much relieved by this little outburst. He had had suspicions of Walter, as indeed he had of every man who spoke to Joyce, and her merriment

now reassured him, at least as far as her cousin was concerned. He was just beginning :

“ You may laugh, but it is no laughing matter to me,” when he was interrupted by another little ripple from Joyce.

“ Oh, it is so funny !” she cried again ; “ and when Walter was so angry with me, too ! How could you be so ridiculous !” and she looked at him with her eyes brimming over with fun.

There is not the slightest doubt in the world that Sir Ethelred would have rushed into a declaration of his feelings in another moment if he had only been allowed a little quiet time to do so in ; but as Joyce looked up at him with her laughing eyes, who should pounce suddenly upon them, like a cat upon an unoffending mouse, but Mrs. Johnstone ! That worthy lady had from a distance seen Sir Ethelred enter the shrub-

bery, and knowing pretty well who was there, she had followed him as quickly as she could ; and from the intense annoyance she saw depicted on his countenance when he saw her, she knew that she had not failed in her object.

“ Your mother is looking for you,” she said to him, which was not true, and he knew it, but could not say so ; “ the Miss Browns want to see the conservatory.” Then turning to Joyce, “ I know your aunt will not like your being here alone ; you had better come with me.”

“ Thanks, I would rather see the conservatory,” said Joyce coolly.

She always enjoyed thwarting Mrs. Johnstone’s schemes, having a cordial dislike for her meddlesomeness, but on this occasion she did not realise the consequences of her defiance.

Sir Ethelred eagerly offered her his arm,

and she tripped away, leaving Mrs. Johnstone literally struck dumb with amazement.

“ Well, of all the brazen-faced things !” she said at last. “ Before my very face, too ! Well, his mother shall hear of it !”

The harmony of the two who walked away together had been considerably disturbed by Mrs. Johnstone’s advent. It was impossible to resume the conversation broken off, and Sir Ethelred muttered something under his breath that sounded like a very good amateur performance in the way of anathema.

Joyce felt uneasy in her mind. Walter’s insinuations were beginning to make themselves felt. She pulled her hand away from her companion’s arm, as she said :

“ I guess I ought to have gone back to Aunt Christina ; where is she ?”

“ Are you vexed ?” he asked anxiously. “ Don’t mind that woman’s meddlesomeness.”

“No, I am not vexed; but I think I really ought to go to Aunt Christina. Do you know where she is?”

“In the conservatory, I believe—really I think so. Let me take you there.”

“Hadn’t you better go and see after those Miss Browns? I am afraid folks will think we are rude.”

Her unconscious use of the pronoun delighted him.

“What do other people matter?” he said, his face beaming with pleasure; “let *us* do as *we* like.”

“Oh, I want to go to Aunt Christina,” she cried, for there was that in his face and voice that frightened her. “Oh, there she is!” and before he could say another word she left his side and ran across a piece of turf to join her aunt, who was looking at some geraniums in a bed.

“Oh, Aunt Christina,” she said, as she

came up to her, “ I am so glad to see you ! I don’t know what has happened to everybody to-day. Flo won’t speak to me, and Walter has been scolding me, and oh, everybody seems queer ! I may stay with you, may not I ?”

“ Yes, of course, dear,” said Mrs. Hyde ; but the manner was rather constrained, and Joyce wondered what had come over her aunt, too.

She wandered about by her side as she chatted to some old ladies of her acquaintance. Presently Joyce caught sight of the Miss Sacketts, and went up to them. She had been rather a favourite with the old ladies, and in her turn liked them for their simple kindly ways. They seemed delighted to see her, and were rapturous in their praises of the entertainment, the house and grounds, and Lady Ashton and her son ; but she was not long with

them, for presently Robert came up to say that the Rectory party were going ; so she followed him away to the front of the house, where Lady Ashton was saying good-bye to her guests.

“ What, you are not going so soon ? ” she said to Mrs. Hyde, who was there with her daughters around her. “ Ethelred will be dreadfully disappointed if you go now. Why not stay to dinner ? —we shall be so glad ; the Chelsneys are going to stay. Do stop.”

“ Thank you, no, not to-day,” said Mrs. Hyde, to everybody’s astonishment, before her husband could speak. She had never asserted herself so violently before, and he was as much surprised as anyone else. “ So much obliged, but we cannot, indeed.”

There was something in Mrs. Hyde’s manner that even her careless good-tempered hostess noticed, a certain inno-

cent ruffling of maternal feathers, and holding up of parent head, such as one might observe in a tiny wren whose nest is threatened by a larger bird. Mrs. Hyde's maternal feathers were all ruffling now.

“ Well, I am sorry if you won't ; good-bye,” said her ladyship, a little coolly ; and after shaking hands with the girls she patted Joyce's shoulder, saying, “ Good-bye, dear child. Come and see me to-morrow ; I should like to hear what you think of your first party.”

“ I have enjoyed it ever so,” said Joyce, looking back at her with smiling eyes.

They did not see Sir Ethelred, and everybody was very silent on the way home.



CHAPTER VI.

JOYCE wondered what was the matter, for as soon as they reached home Flo went upstairs into Eanswith's room and was seen no more for the evening, Eanswith bringing down word at supper that she had a bad headache. Mrs. Hyde, too, looked as if she had been crying, and Blanche would scarcely speak to Joyce. The Archdeacon and Robert were the only members of the family who seemed perfectly at their ease, and they both appeared in unusually good spirits. Robert especially was so very much elated that twice during the performance of Blanche

and Eanswith's duet he burst out into a loud "guffaw" of laughter and then instantly subsided with his head in his arms. It was quite contrary to his usual custom to stay in the drawing-room in the evening, and Joyce puzzled herself in trying to find out what made him do it. Apparently it was for the pleasure of watching her, for whenever she looked at him she found his eyes full upon her, and that he was undergoing the most frightful contortions to keep from making another outbreak of mirth.

"What *is* the matter?" she whispered to him, as she came and sat beside him in a noisy part of the duet; being answered only by a sniggle that caused the Arch-deacon to look up quickly from his book and say, "Hush—sh!" she dared not ask him anything more.

"Come downstairs," he said to her presently. "Oh, my eye, it will kill me!"

She slipped out after him as quietly as possible, and they went into the empty dining-room, and Robert shut the door. It was almost dark there, and they could barely see each other's faces. Robert's first performance was to hug his head with his arms and give vent to a long series of chokes supposed by Joyce to be suppressed laughter, and he then further mystified her by standing on one leg and giving a series of the most extraordinary hops ; after which his excitement abated a little, and he sat on the edge of the table and began to unfold his views to his cousin.

“It's the primest lark that ever was,” he said, still on the broad grin. “Oh, my eye, how splendid it's all turned out! I *never* saw such a game. I say, Joyce, you'll let us have a mount, won't you? You were always a jolly one!”

“Have a mount?” said Joyce ; “what do you mean?”

“Mean! Oh, come, that’s rich—that’s good, that is, at this time of day, asking me what I mean! I like that, I do!”

“Well, what do you mean?” she said.

“You are not going to gammon me, Joyce, so you needn’t think it. You can’t mean to tell me you don’t know what to-day meant!”

“I don’t, then!”

“Oh, I say, Joyce, don’t be a fool; why, it’s as plain as a pikestaff. You can’t mean to tell me you don’t see? Well, I’m hanged if I believe you do after all,” he added, peering into her surprised face.

“I don’t really know what you mean,” she said. “Is it what has vexed Flo? I couldn’t help people’s talking to me, and I made Sir Ethelred go after her, I did really. I don’t see what she can be vexed for. What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Well,” said Master Robert Hyde,

putting his hands in his pockets and stretch~~in~~
ing his long legs to their fullest exten~~s~~
t, while his face wore a look of the blankes~~es~~
wonder—"well, of all the rummy starts, thi~~s~~ ~~is~~
is the rummest!"

" You aggravation !" said Joyce, giving~~in~~
him a little shake ; " why *don't* you say wha~~t~~
you mean ?"

" I'll be shot if I do !" he said, getting up
and going to the door ; then opening it and
looking back, he added this complimentary
remark : " Joyce, you are the biggest fool
that ever lived !" and going out, he banged
the door after him.

" Oh dear, was there ever such a tire-
some boy !" cried Joyce, running after him ;
but she was too late to catch him, for she
saw him pass through the front gates and
across the road in the direction of Ashton
Court.

She stood in the porch and looked after

him, wondering very much what had made him behave in such an extraordinary manner ; but Robert's eccentricities did not occupy her mind very long. There were other and more pleasant thoughts to absorb her as she stood looking out into the moonlight. The great evergreens and elms cast their long shadows on the turf, and their shadowy branches almost touched her feet ; but every moment the moon rose higher and bathed her in its pale light. As she stood there, the soft brightness falling upon her hair and lighting up her pale dress, the dark shadows all about her, and the clustering leaves over her head, she made as lovely a picture of innocent girlhood as any could wish to see. There was a thoughtfulness on her face and a wistful tenderness in her eyes, that belonged rather to the woman she would be than to the girl she had been. On this night she stood, as

it were, on the boundary between the two states ; never before had that womanly tenderness shone in her clear eyes ; never before had the mute stirring of her heart made itself felt as she felt it to-night. The quietness of her surroundings and the weird melancholy that belongs to moonlight developed those feelings that had been dimly present with her all through the day, and that she had vainly tried to drown in gaiety and excitement. A good deal had happened to her that day. Her cousin's words, Sir Ethelred's manner, Lady Ashton's and her people's behaviour to her, might each have given her ample subject for reflection ; but as she stood out in the silver light all these things fell away from her as if they had never been, and what her heart mused over were Austin's words and the tones in which he had spoken.

They were not very much to remember.

The whole conversation had not lasted for a quarter of an hour. She had seen five times as much of Sir Ethelred, and twice as much of the flannel-coated man from Oxford, but she forgot both of these, and everyone else ; and as she recalled that one wild look of Austin's, a shiver passed over her that left her pale and trembling.

Her aunt came into the hall behind her.

“ Joyce, Joyce ! why, Joyce, what are you doing out there ?”

“ I was only looking at the moon,” said Joyce feebly, suddenly feeling as though she had taken a plunge into a cold bath.

“ It is too late for you to be out here. If you want to look at the moon go to the back of the house, where you will not be seen from the road. It is not the thing for a girl to stand here in the evenings.”

The unwonted severity of Mrs. Hyde's tones chilled Joyce to the heart. She felt

as though she had been suddenly cast from a high and glorious elevation to the very dust. She was over-excited and somewhat nervous from the events of the day, and her aunt's cold tones wounded her sorely. It was the first time Mrs. Hyde had ever spoken to her with anything but affection. Her very soreness caused her to turn in a way that had she not been in an over-wrought state of mind she would not have done.

“What have I done that you should treat me as a criminal?” she cried, a red spot burning on each of her cheeks. “I have done nothing wrong, yet you all treat me as if I were wicked. What does it all mean?”

Mrs. Hyde looked worried and anxious. Her usually soft manner was replaced by a nervous irritation.

“You must not speak to me like that,”

she said. "If your own conscience does not tell you your faults, it is your uncle's place, not mine, to do so."

"I don't want the Archdeacon or anybody else to preach to me," said Joyce, roused into actual defiance. "My own conscience is perfectly clear, thank you, which I am sure is more than Flo's or Walter's can be after their treatment of me. I wish I was dead, I do!" and with this last outbreak of her childishness Joyce burst into a flood of tears, and rushed up to her own room, and there sobbed herself to sleep.

So ended the day of Joyce's first party, and the last night of her girlhood.

The next day Joyce kept to her own room all the morning, not even going to church. The natural reaction after yesterday had set in, and she was shaken and miserable. There was a gloom over the

family deeper than usual. Scarcely a word was spoken. Mrs. Hyde looked tearful and worried, the elder girls grave and anxious, Flo white and contemptuous, with a suspicious redness about the eyelids ; and she showed a decidedly cold shoulder to her cousin, not deigning to take the slightest notice of her usual greeting. The Archdeacon was the only member of the family who seemed unconscious that anything was wrong in his domestic circle, not having had the bringing it about, for it would be difficult to make him understand that anything of consequence could have occurred without his help. But his letters, or his newspapers, or both, did not appear to be to his mind, and he pished and pshawed a good deal over them while he ate his breakfast. Robert, too, seemed by no means as confident and cheerful as he had been the evening before, and was in a chronic state

of surveying Joyce surreptitiously, with a good deal of wonder depicted on his countenance. Walter was prim, grave and silent, and gave but an unwilling consent to go for his father to a neighbouring town on a small matter of business ; but, to Joyce's relief, he did go, and she was greatly pleased after breakfast to hear the carriage roll away with him in it.

After dinner, which was despatched in much the same gloomy manner as breakfast had been, Robert stopped his cousin as she was going through the hall and asked her if she was not going to see Lady Ashton as she had been asked to do.

Before Joyce could reply Mrs. Hyde did so for her.

“ I must beg that you will not go to Ashton Court to-day, Joyce.”

“ Oh, cert'ly,” said Joyce, with a little toss of her head. “ I don't want to go. You

may take my love to Lady Ashton if you are going there, Bob, and tell her that being treated with so much kindness yesterday has so upset me that I really don't feel equal to going out to-day, but am undergoing a course of treatment to bring me back to my normal condition."

"You are extremely impertinent," said Mrs. Hyde, reddening.

Joyce made no answer, but went upstairs and bolted her door. She had not been there very long when she heard a low whistle under her window ; on looking out she saw Robert.

"Don't stay moping up there like a toad in a hole," he said ; "come out in the yard and look at the puppies!"

"All right," she said, for she was getting heartily tired of playing the dignified young lady ; "I'll come down my stairs."

She was soon out in the yard ; but

Robert seemed to find less pleasure in his canine family than usual. He had a pre-occupied air, and was constantly glancing towards the road at the end of the yard as though looking for something. There was an air of mystery over him too, and that, combined with a tendency to suddenly burst into a roar of laughter, terminating in a series of chokes, produced a very curious, not to say ludicrous, effect.

At last, with the air of a diplomatist dispensing weighty affairs of state, Robert suggested to his cousin that they should take a walk.

“No,” said Joyce wearily. “Aunt Christina will think I am gone to Ashton Court if I go out.”

“Well, let’s go.”

“I shall not do anything of the kind.”

“Well, you needn’t cut up rough in that way. Let’s at least go in the orchard—this beastly place is so hot!”

Joyce followed him to the door.

"Shall we go in the big orchard?" he said in so assumed a careless voice that the most intense anxiety was visible in its tones.

"As you like," said Joyce dolefully; "I guess I don't care what happens much."

"Oh, but you will though!" cried Robert, with a roar of laughter ending in the usual chokes. "My eye," he continued, wiping that organ, "how jolly green you are, Joyce!"

"Don't!" was all that young lady's reply; "I wouldn't look so idiotic, Robert!"

"Oh yes, you would though!" said that youth, grinning in contortions of delight. "I say, won't you though, when you know!"

"If you go on in this *insane* manner," said Joyce, stamping her little foot on the soft grass, "I will go right in. I never saw anybody behave so ridiculously in my . . ."

“ I say, don’t be vexed,” said Robert, sobering himself as much as he could ; “ I am jolly fond of you, Joyce.”

She put her arm round his neck and kissed him.

“ I am horridly cross to-day,” she said penitently. “ Let us make it up, and have a race ; I’ll be at the stile first.”

“ That you will,” said Robert to himself, making a great feint of running as fast as he could ; “ blessed if I don’t see his hat over the hedge now. Oh, my eye, what a lark ! she don’t see him ! Hi, Joyce, I’ll be in yet !”

“ I’ve won !” cried Joyce, grasping the top rail of the stile and looking round with sparkling eyes.

“ I only wish I had !” said a voice close to her, and a hand was laid upon her own.

She turned round breathless with surprise.

“Why, Sir Ethelred!” she cried.

“You are not sorry to see me, I hope,” he answered, swinging himself over the stile and standing beside her.

“Oh no,” she said; and then added quickly, for there was that mysterious something in his manner again, “Bob and I are running races; you are not too grown up to run too, are you?”

“I don’t see Bob,” he replied, looking at the orchard.

“Oh, where can he be gone?” cried Joyce in vexation; “how dreadfully stupid of him to go off in that way! where can he be?”

“You don’t mind being here with me, do you?” he asked, bending over her.

“Oh no, don’t be *stupid!*” said Joyce with a little stamp; she was vexed and uncomfortable. “Let us go in.”

“Do stay with me a moment!” he cried,

catching her hand. "Joyce, if you only knew what it is to me to be here with you—no, don't stop me, don't! hear me out. Joyce, you must have seen how dearly, unutterably I love you!" the young man stopped here, fairly taken aback by the expression of the girl's eyes.

"What, *me*!" she cried, snatching her hand away; "how could you dare to say anything so mean to me!" and her face lit up with a blaze of anger.

"Oh, don't!" cried the poor young man; "oh, don't look like that, Joyce! I know I am nothing for you to care about—I have dared to hope you might some day—but if you knew how I loved you now, you——"

"Oh, hush!" she interrupted him; "it isn't that at all, but for it to be me! Why, it can't be! it is Flo you mean, not me!"

"Flo!" he cried, while his face brightened; "Flo, why Flo is no more to

me than that tree is. I never cared for Flo in the least. Oh, Joyce darling," he cried, emboldened by the delicious hope that her seeming jealousy had called forth, "I love you, and you only, with all my heart and soul!"

He again took her hands in his and stood looking in wonder at her face. It had crimsoned in her anger, but was now pale to the very lips. Great tears stood in her eyes, no longer bright and piercing, but filled with a sorrow he had never seen in them before. She was trembling so that he put his arm about her to steady her.

"Darling," he whispered, "don't look at me like that. If you don't love me now, say you will try to, dear. I do love you so."

"Oh no, no!" she said, in a voice that sounded like a little broken sob; "oh, please don't talk to me like that! oh, it is dreadful, dreadful! Oh, don't touch me,

please!" and she shrank away from him and leant her head against the gnarled brown trunk of an old cherry-tree.

He was touched and alarmed by the agony in her voice and face.

"Forgive me," he cried; "I have been too sudden with you. I have frightened you. Take a little time to think, darling; but believe me, I love you more than all the world."

"Oh no, no!" she cried, still in that bitter voice of pain; "it is too dreadful!"

"Darling, that I love you?"

"Oh, why did you ever say such a thing to me?" she moaned, wringing her hands in passionate grief; "why did you ever speak to me so—why did you ever do it?"

"Why? Because I love you so," he cried, coming nearer to her. "Oh, Joyce, won't you even try and care for me?"

She was a little calmer now; the pas-

sionate movements of her hands had ceased, and she leant very pale and trembling against the tree, looking at him with eyes so full of pain that they tortured him.

“Why do you look at me like that?” he cried at last, in desperation. “Surely you must have seen that I have loved you from the very day you came here!”

A red flush passed over her, and in her shame she pulled her dusky hair about her face to hide it.

“No, no!” she cried. “Believe me, I never guessed it. Why, how should I think you could care for me? I am nobody!”

“You are the dearest thing in the world to me!” he said, not without some dignity.

“Oh, I am so sorry, so dreadfully sorry,” she said, the red flush covering her face again; “but indeed—indeed I never dreamt of such a thing, and—and I was so stupid I never saw until now what

the others meant ;" and she hung her head.

" Of course, everybody has seen !" he cried, willing to follow every advantage he could gain ; " my mother knows, and is delighted. You saw how much she liked you yesterday. But who could help it ? It is only your innocence that has kept your eyes shut, my darling, and I love you all the better for it."

" No, no," she cried, " not that. Oh, this is dreadful !" and she covered her face with her hands.

" What is dreadful, dear ? Not my love for you, is it ?" he asked, coming closer to her, and trying gently to draw away her hands from her face. " Is that very dreadful to you, dearest ?"

" Oh yes, because I don't want it, and I am so sorry," she said, looking at him with her clear, sweet eyes ; " but—but I don't

mean that 'you are dreadful. It—it is something else ;' and she crimsoned again, and then hurried on : " I am sure I am very grateful to you for liking me so much, very indeed ; but oh ! please, don't say anything more about it."

" Can't you love me even a little ?" he cried.

" A little won't do," she said, looking at him fully ; " you ought not to be loved a little, but altogether, and I can't do that."

" If you would only put up with me for a little while," he pleaded. " I love you so, my love would do for us both, and in time you might get to love me a little too."

" I might," she said ; then added hastily, " if, that is—" and then she could not go on.

" There isn't anybody else ?" he cried, in sudden fierce jealousy.

" No, no," she answered, putting out her

hand as if to stop him in some act ; "but it is impossible, quite impossible !"

"Don't, Joyce, don't ! give me a little time !"

"No," she said, sorrowfully shaking her head. She regained her composure as he seemed losing his. "That would only make it worse. Dear Sir Ethelred, I would love you if I could."

"You might try," he said, raising his pained eyes to hers.

"It wouldn't be any use ; because—well, if—if ever I do love anybody, it will be somebody—not you !"

"That is enough," he said gloomily ; "that means you love some one else. I might have known I was too big a fool for you !"

"Don't, don't !" she cried, catching him by the hand as he turned away ; "oh, don't think that ! If I didn't really like you so

much as I do I would marry you on the spot, and make you miserable ever afterwards."

"I wish you would try!" he said, looking at her as the sound of a little forced laugh died away among the trees, and he felt the big drops fall on his hand from her eyes.

"I like you too much for that," she said, sobbing. "If I had the least grain of hope that I ever could love you I would say 'Yes' to you; but I know so well it can't be. I seem to know all at once things I never dreamt of before. It seems years since yesterday. Don't ask me any more, please—I can't really."

He stood silent for several moments, clasping her hands tightly in his own. Then he said slowly, and in a very different voice to the one he had used before :

"I can't believe it."

"You must do so," she said, lifting her

brimming eyes to him, "because I do like you so very much. You have been so kind to me—kinder than anybody. I can't bear to say 'No' to you, but it must be so!"

He still stood holding her hands and looking at her.

"Do you mind my saying something?" she asked him timidly.

"I wish you would go on saying something to me for ever. If you reviled me, the sound of your voice would be sweeter than other people's praises," he answered, moodily enough.

"You would soon get tired of that," she said, trying to smile. "But what I want to say is this: some day when you have forgotten me—yes, you will, you must, in this way, but never, I hope, as a friend—then, then you must come to Charrington Rectory just as often as you do now, and you will be very happy. Now, good-

bye, and believe me, I am very, very sorry."

"Good-bye," he said. Still he did not go. "I must tell you that I have just come from your uncle, and he gave his full consent to my proposal. Let me at least wait a few days for your final decision."

"Oh dear, you didn't say anything to him!" she cried in dismay.

"Of course I did," he replied, "and I am glad to say he seemed very much pleased; but he laid a good deal of stress on the fact that you were very young—young even for your years, he said—and this makes me press the point with you to take time to think it over a little. You say yourself that I am not objectionable to you, and that there is nobody else. Don't you think that you could try to like me a little better? Won't you at least give a week's, or even a fortnight's, consideration

to the subject before you ruin my life for me?"

"Oh, it mustn't do that," she said; "and really I don't believe I shall ever feel any different."

"Give me time," he pleaded, holding her hands still between his own, "only give me a little time—your uncle wishes it. God forbid that he or I should force your inclination, but give me a little time. You can scarcely know what it all means now. You yourself say that things seem different to you to what they did; it cannot hurt you to take a little time to consider this matter, and it is all the world to me what answer you give me. At least give me a week."

"Very well," she said slowly, "I will do as you wish; but please don't think I am going to alter. I wish I could do as you ask me," she added, as the tears came into

her eyes at seeing him so eager and anxious before her.

He raised her hands to his lips.

“I do not urge any other considerations upon you,” he said. “Think only of how I love you—that you are more than all the world to me.”

He dropped her hands, and they both turned to go. She walked slowly away under the shadow of the orchard trees, with the sunlight coming in flickering spots upon her white dress and her bent dusky head. She moved very slowly, as one in a dream, with her hands held lightly before her and her eyes upon the ground. He stood looking after her with his hand upon the stile, and a great trouble in his heart. He could not but see that the girl did not love him; but hope is hard to kill, and in spite of his present pain he hoped on.



CHAPTER VII.

JOYCE went into the house as in a dream. She was conscious of there being an air of something unusual there as she came in, for the study-door was open, and Mrs. Hyde and Blanche were standing in the hall looking rather astounded and apparently not knowing what to say to each other. They both looked at Joyce as she entered, and stopped talking; while Joyce, intent only on her own thoughts, went past them to her room.

Then her pent-up emotion found relief in a long fit of silent weeping; not stormy, tempestuous sobbing, as Joyce's crying had

hitherto been, but the long straining silent crying that belongs to deeper feelings and more developed womanhood. Joyce was no longer a child. She had left childhood behind her when she listened to the cry in her own heart that Sir Ethelred's words had called forth. She listened to it now in the bitterest shame and self-reproach. It seemed to her inexperienced eyes such a horrible shameful thing to love a man unsought and unasked ; to have even that dim feeling, wild and vague and restless, about him that she felt, and that could not be real love because it tortured her—for love she believed was a pleasant thing—but even this was enough to cover her with shame for what she considered her forwardness.

“ Oh, how he would hate me for it ! ” she cried to herself, “ he is so grave and wise and good, so altogether far beyond me ! And he let me be his little friend, for he saw how



much I wanted a friend. He has tried to be what my father was to me, and this is how I have misused his kindness ; but he shall never know it. I will not wear my heart on my sleeve as Flo has done—poor Flo ! He shall never know that I care about him other than as a friend. I will run away, or kill myself first ! He shall never know. And poor Sir Ethelred ! Oh, if I had not been so foolish, so wicked, such an utter idiot to trespass on *his* kindness, perhaps I might have got to love Sir Ethelred, and all would have been happy ! No, no ! I never could have been happy loving anybody but *him*, and I will not love *him* ! Oh dear, what shall I do ? If only mother or father were here ! " and the poor child broke down utterly, and was only conscious of her pain and the great loneliness of her life.

Presently she became more composed and tried to think more quietly ; but her

head seemed to go round, and her thoughts to tumble one against another and get mixed. Her head ached, too, after her crying, and all she could do was to lie on her little white bed and let the long hot hours of the summer afternoon move slowly on. At six o'clock they called her to come to tea. She would have gladly remained where she was, but her relations must be faced some time, and it was better to get it over quickly, so she rose and went into the drawing-room.

The Archdeacon was standing on the hearthrug waiting for his tea as she came in. She had heard his loud laugh as she came along the passage, and it seemed as though he had been talking of her, for he said as she entered :

“ Ah, here she is! Come here, my dear;” and on going up to him, he took her face between his hands and kissed her affectionately on both cheeks.

She was surprised, and at any other time the greeting would have pleased her; but now she felt that it was intended as a species of congratulation or approval for what she had not done. But to explain matters in the face of the assembled family would have been more than she could have done then, if her very existence had depended upon it, so she could only accept the embrace and shyly shrink away to a corner by the window where no one else was sitting.

The Archdeacon seemed to take her silence and retiring by no means amiss, but chatted on about ordinary subjects in his happiest manner; indeed, Joyce had never seen him so pleasant and genial before, and she grew more and more nervous and unhappy at the thought that she would have to tell him he was entirely mistaken. Indeed, as she watched him

from her corner, and noted his firm, straight, thin lips, and the quick sharpness of his piercing eyes, and the habitual frown of the heavy eyebrows, she doubted if she could ever convince him against his own wishes of what she intended to do. He seemed so dogmatic, so domineering, so intensely positive that what he thought was what ought to be and what was, that her heart sank within her at the prospect of her confession. She drank her tea in silence and trembling, and debated within herself whether it would not be better to put it off until to-morrow.

She looked at the other faces about her: Mrs. Hyde had that worried look still about her brow, and a mild antagonistic wonder pervading her entire face and figure. Joyce wondered whether her eyebrows would ever come down again, they seemed so intensely astonished. She wished she did

not look quite so annoyed, but Flo's face at the tea-table was not calculated to rejoice a mother's heart. It was very white and haughty and cold—a very incarnation of pride and disdain it appeared to Joyce; and Eanswith's, in a less degree, wore the same expression. Blanche looked more like her mother, and was the serenest of the party, apparently concentrating her mind upon her tea-making duties.

Robert, radiant and glowing, was seated close to the large sweet seed-cake by the tea-table, and took frequent opportunities of bestowing a broad and knowing grin on his cousin over Flo's head. Walter had not yet come back.

Very little was said by anybody except the Archdeacon, and there was a nervous constrained air about everybody else, except Robert.

“It must be done to-night,” Joyce felt,

glancing at the faces before her. "It will never do to leave it any longer, or they will all believe it. Nobody does now but Bob and the Archdeacon. The others all think I am too far beneath him for it to be true. They cannot believe he could prefer me to Flo—I am sure I wish he didn't. But she need not look so horridly scornful about it. I wouldn't, if I were in her place."

Joyce was glad when the Archdeacon had finished his tea and went downstairs; she put down her cup and followed him. Nobody asked her where she was going, though Flo dropped her eyes contemptuously as she passed her. For an instant Joyce felt a desire to turn and deliver one of her cutting little speeches to her cousin; but her better nature prevailed, and she left the room quietly. She knocked at the study-door, and the Archdeacon called to her to come in; then, seeing who it was, he said :

“ Ha, ha! well, Joyce, my dear, I am delighted, really delighted, and so I am sure poor dear Julius, your father, would have been. He is a capital fellow, really a very good fellow indeed, and I am heartily glad for you, my dear ;” and to Joyce’s exceeding confusion the Archdeacon rose and embraced her again.

“ Oh, uncle !” she said feebly, for she felt terribly weak against him—she had been long enough in the family for some of the traditional awe of him to have crept into her—“ Oh, uncle, I am so very sorry !”

“ Ha, ha, ha !” he laughed ; “ well, my dear, your aunt is better to talk to on such matters than I am, but I am pleased, very much pleased ;” and he looked at the door as though he intended her to depart after this hint.

“ Thank you, uncle !” she said, making a tremendous effort, “ but I thought I ought

to come and tell you that, please, really I can't."

"Hey, what?" he said, his thick eyebrows coming down in a way that frightened her. "Can't—can't what?"

"Please, I can't marry him," she said faintly, leaning against the study-table as she spoke.

He looked at her sharply for a moment; then, seeing how white she looked, rose and opened the door and called "Mamma!" in his loud way, and then came back to her.

"You are very young and excitable," he said, laying his hand upon her shoulder. "You had better rest a little, and if you have anything to say to me in the morning you can say it. We none of us want to force you into anything, my dear."

"Thank you, oh, thank you!" said Joyce, with tears in her eyes at his unexpected gentleness.

“ There, keep quiet, there’s a good girl,” he said. “ We mustn’t have things hurried. He is a good fellow, and you are very young. Mamma, this child wants looking after ; give her a little tincture of aconite and let her lie down.”

“ Oh, thank you, if I might go for a little walk !” said Joyce, in terror of her own thoughts through the long evening hours.

“ Of course, of course, anything you like,” said the Archdeacon a little impatiently, taking up a book. He wanted to be rid of women-folk in his study ; they annoyed him there when he wished to be quiet. So Joyce and her aunt went out.

“ You had better have a little aconite, dear,” said Mrs. Hyde, her kind heart smiting her for her coolness to the orphan girl as she saw how white and trembling she was. “ As papa says, it will do you good.”

“ If I might go out in the garden ?” said Joyce, a hard lump coming into her throat at Mrs. Hyde’s words.

“ Yes, of course, dear. Shall one of us come with you, or would you rather be alone ?”

“ Alone, please,” said Joyce, as she followed her aunt into her room, where she obediently swallowed a table-spoonful of a mixture of three drops of homœopathic tincture of aconite in half a pint of water.

She longed for some little word or sign from her that would touch upon the subject nearest both their hearts, but neither came, and Joyce’s heart hardened again.

“ I will not say a word about it until they speak to me,” she thought. “ If they like to think I am sure to marry anybody who asks me, they can. I shall not undeceive them. I shall speak to Uncle Laurence about it, and he can tell them or not as he

chooses ;" and so Joyce passed out into the garden.

That evening a little scene of a wholly different character had taken place at Ashton Court. Mrs. Johnstone had come in to talk over the party with her dear friend, and the dear friend, after the manner of women, was decidedly entertained by the sharp little lady's observations on the sayings and doings of *her* dear friends ; and so the two ladies got on very well together until Mrs. Johnstone discreetly worked the conversation round to a dissertation upon the fast ways of the new Miss Hyde.

"Well, really I don't know that I observed anything of the sort," said Lady Ashton good-humouredly. "She seemed to me a nice bright little thing."

"Oh, bright enough," said Mrs. Johnstone ; "those Yankees are always sharp enough, there's no fear of that."

"But she is not a Yankee. Her father was a Hyde," said Lady Ashton.

"Well, she was brought up there, and her mother was an Irishwoman," said Mrs. Johnstone, waiving such small considerations as geography and ethnology ; "and a more barefaced thing than her attempt yesterday *I* never saw!"

"Attempt to do what?" asked Lady Ashton.

"Oh, my dear, I fear you will know soon enough! I only wonder you never noticed it; but you are always so good-natured. Why her scheme to be Lady Ashton, to be sure! a deep designing little hussy!"

Lady Ashton broke into a laugh.

"She needn't scheme very much to be that," she said, "for it's my belief that Ethelred has gone to ask her this very afternoon. He gave me a hint the other

day of his intentions, and I immediately went to see her—in considerable trepidation, I can assure you. But really I was quite charmed. She is quite pretty—a little *farouche* sometimes, but that rather goes down now. What did you say?"

"Say!" echoed Mrs. Johnstone, whose astonishment had literally kept her silent. "You don't mean to say you can tolerate the idea of such a match!"

"Well, my good friend, I can't say that I should have chosen her as a wife for Ethelred, certainly, because of course, between you and me, he might look higher, and of course money is a useful thing. He ought to have a better place than this. But, my dear, if you had lived near Oxford and seen the *awful* girls that I have seen there, and endured the agonies over pretty young governesses that *I* have, you would be rejoiced to think that it is all over.

Ethelred's marriage has been hanging over my head for ages ; and really this child is very sweet and pretty, and nobody need know anything about her mother—her father is enough. I shall go abroad as soon as it is over ; Ethelred must get it settled before the cold weather, and then I shall go to Ems. My duty to him has kept me in this wretched climate before, and I really begin to think it has affected my health. I shall go to Ems—the Chelmsfields will be there, and Lady Harrow—it will be great fun."

" But—but this girl !" gasped Mrs. Johnstone, unable to grasp the enormity of the idea even now.

" Bah !" said Lady Ashton, shrugging her shoulders ; " that is Ethelred's affair. She is pretty and pleasant, and belongs to decent people. The Hydes are as good as we are, and that is enough for me. Some more tea ?"

“No, I thank you,” said Mrs. Johnstone, sitting bolt upright in her chair; “and I can only say that I am extremely astonished!”

“You wouldn’t be if you were a mother,” said Lady Ashton, suppressing a slight yawn. “My dear Mrs. Johnstone, it’s the greatest relief to me. Ethelred will keep up the family name and all that—indeed I don’t know that I shall not marry myself now he is off my hands,” and her ladyship reviewed her youthful face and figure in a large glass beside her; “anyhow I shall go to Ems,” she said musingly.

Mrs. Johnstone was too much disgusted at the turn affairs were taking to say anything more, so she rose, and with an abrupt good-bye was taking her leave, when Lady Ashton called after her:

“If you see Ethelred, send him in to me!”

“Send him in! I wish I had the whipping of him and sending him to bed, as I have done before now!” gasped Mrs. Johnstone to herself as she went out. “That artful designing little hussy, and that fool of a mother of his! Marry again! yes, I dare say she will, or do any other folly that comes into her head! I have no patience with such people!”

Mrs. Johnstone’s thoughts carried her on apace, for instead of turning in at her own garden-gate she walked on past the Hydes’ towards the village.

“I have a great mind to go in,” she said, stopping at the footpath that led past the orchard. “I wonder if he has been here? Perhaps even now it is not too late to give Mrs. Hyde another warning to keep that designing girl out of the way. I never will believe but that she has led him into it, never! Ethelred was always weak, but

never such a fool as to go after an insignificant saucy chit like that. I will go and see!" So the worthy lady picked her way across the damp grass of the orchard.

It was getting dusk, and there was barely light to distinguish anything under the shadow of the trees. As Mrs. Johnstone came up to the little gate leading into the garden she gave a great start at seeing something white leaning over it.

"Good gracious! is that you?" was her exclamation, as Joyce raised herself and brought her troubled dreamy gaze upon her. "What on earth are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Nothing," said Joyce, trying to bring back her scattered faculties, and being greatly aided therein by the extreme sharpness of the lady's tones.

"Looking for somebody, I dare say," said that amiable person.

“No,” said Joyce, recovering; “were you?”

“Don’t give me any of your impudence, miss; I won’t stand it.”

“I don’t think you could if you carried any more,” was Joyce’s grave reply.

Mrs. Johnstone’s brow was almost murderous.

“How dare you speak to me in that way, you minx! I suppose you think because you have got on that poor young man’s and his idiot mother’s blind side, you can on mine. But it is not so. You can’t take me in!”

“I am sure I wish somebody else would,” said Joyce politely. “They are all in the drawing-room, Mrs. Johnstone.”

“You think it a fine thing to be Lady Ashton, no doubt,” sneered the little woman, almost beside herself with rage at seeing Joyce’s cool manner; “but you

never shall be, if I can help it. I can see through you if no one else can."

"You don't say so!" returned Joyce, putting her hands at the back of her head and giving herself a stretch. "I can hardly think so, though," she added, "because you would never stay there if you could see what I think."

"You shall never marry Sir Ethelred!" said Mrs. Johnstone, with a stamp of her foot.

"I assure you I haven't the least intention of doing so; he isn't my style!" drawled Joyce, moving away and leaving her lively little enemy petrified with amazement.

She went into the house presently, but Mrs. Johnstone did not follow her there. She determined to seek Sir Ethelred instead.



CHAPTER VIII.

MOYCE'S dreaded interview with her uncle took place the next morning after church. It was not quite so formidable as she had expected, though, as she had anticipated, she failed to convince him of her intentions. He was kind in his brusque, sharp way, but treated her and her scruples as childish and unreasonable, insisting on her youth and inexperience, and that she must take time to reflect. He refused to accept her present decision as final, believing that it was but the natural hesitation of a very young girl who did not know her own mind; so he

dismissed her and her objections, advising her to speak only to her aunt on the matter, and to think it over quietly—nay, more, to make it the subject of frequent prayer in church. His words were well chosen and kind, even if a little too autocratic, and Joyce left him, feeling utterly unable to force her mind's desire against his will, but more convinced than ever that her own way was the only way she intended to follow.

She was sorely beset and troubled. It seemed so incomprehensible to everybody that she should not want to marry Sir Ethelred, that at last she began to consider whether she really ought not to wish to do so too. But beyond this she never got. Much as she liked the young Baronet, she knew as no one else could know the utter unsuitability of mind and purpose between them. So far, the circumstances of her life had done little to show the reserve forces

that lay hid in Joyce's character; and though but half conscious of them herself, they guided her in forming her attachments and friendships.

For this reason, Walter, in spite of his primness, was at this juncture of her life a sort of friend to her. He alone of all those about her divined that, gay and pleasant as Sir Ethelred was, he lacked the solid elements the husband of Joyce should possess. Joyce, to use his favourite expression, needed development. Sir Ethelred, so far from aiding her in that way, would be an unconscious drag upon her. He never said as much to Joyce, but he felt it, and his feelings found some way to express themselves, for she knew well enough that he was the only one of the family who sympathised with her rejection of her lover.

A day or two passed by, and gradually Mrs. Hyde's manner regained its former

serenity. There was really nothing to object to in the match, which they all believed must inevitably occur; in fact, as soon as she got over her first keen disappointment about Flo, Mrs. Hyde was pleased at her niece's good fortune.

Still there lingered in her mind an uncomfortable suspicion that Joyce had in some way ousted Flo from the scene. Even in her best moments she could not believe that Sir Ethelred, if left entirely to his own devices, could have chosen Joyce in preference to Flo. Mrs. Johnstone's bitter words had borne their fruit, for even gentle Mrs. Hyde could look upon her niece with eyes of suspicion. As for the girls, they one and all believed their cousin to have used the most underhand means to attain her end. Had they not seen with their own eyes Sir Ethelred's attentions to Flo? If Joyce had generally happened to be by, it was a

mere accident ; it was by Flo's side that he always walked on the way home from church ; it must have been Flo, not Joyce, whom he had sought in their walks. It was clear that Joyce had used some unholy arts and wiles to entrap her cousin's lover. The girls remembered with horror that scene at the garden-party when Joyce was the centre of attraction under the lime-trees. They had disapproved of what they considered her fast conduct at the time ; how much more so now when they saw the dire results of such boldness ! The elder girls could not forgive her ; their deepest affections were centred on each other ; a slight to one was a mortal offence to the other two, especially if it happened to Flo, who by common consent was the pet and spoilt darling, as well as the bosom friend, of the elder sisters. They made no secret of their feeling towards their cousin. As their mother re-

lented they hardened, and hardened in that cold, unreasoning manner that belongs to young people of narrow and fixed opinions, who have had little or no experience of the frailties and sorrows of humanity.

Joyce's lessons at this time were her great comfort. Walter paid unusual attention to them, reading with her as soon as they returned from church, and passing most of the afternoons also in her company in the dining-room. At these times scarcely anything was ever spoken of beyond the lesson in hand, but by his manner Walter certainly conveyed to his cousin his approbation of her conduct. He had got Froude's "Julius Cæsar" for her, having gone into Moulbury on purpose to buy it, and had presented it to her on his return, and now she read it aloud to him. Prim and commonplace as Walter seemed in society, he was pleasant and interesting enough when in

his proper element of teacher, and Joyce's lessons were made both instructive and delightful to her. On his own special subjects of classical lore he was particularly able as a teacher and expounder, and during these days of Joyce's distress he exerted himself to his utmost to please her.

So well did he succeed that by the Saturday evening of the week in which the garden-party had taken place she had recovered to a great extent her former bright looks and spirits: "Julius Cæsar" was for the time far more interesting than Sir Ethelred and his love; as to Austin Leybourne, she resolutely kept him in the background of her thoughts, and gave herself no time to think about him. Of course this very self-repression made her dimly conscious of the hold he had upon her; but Joyce was a decided young person when she chose to be so, and she most deliber-

ately did choose now that she would not think about Austin.

The recovery of her usual spirits was to the rest of the family an outward and visible sign that she had accepted the good fate in store for her, and had, after a proper show of reluctance, made up her mind to marry Sir Ethelred. Mrs. Hyde, who never under any circumstances could remain angry for any long time together, was already thinking of the wedding and the bridesmaids, and had held an important consultation with the Archdeacon as to the capabilities of their dining-room. By Sunday morning she was so deeply immersed in her calculations and plans that the most absent-minded person on earth must have noticed that she had some important secret on her mind.

The Miss Sacketts not being particularly absent-minded, but extremely observant of all the Rectory ways and expressions, had

not joined her at the corner and walked towards the church for two minutes before they knew that something out of the common was afloat.

Bob had been walking with his mother, and the girls were on before, while Walter followed with Joyce, so Miss Sackett addressed herself to Bob.

“Now, my dear Mr. Robert, I am sure you can tell us, such a friend as you are, of course, not that one can be sure of any rumours.”

“So unsafe,” said Miss Mary, “one never can be certain of anything one hears; but then so near home, and could not have travelled far before it came to us.”

“You can’t surely have heard,” broke in Mrs. Hyde—“why nobody can know anything about it.”

“Well, of course, dear Mrs. Hyde, as I said, one never can be sure of rumour, for

the most unlikely things possible do sometimes turn out to be true, and then just the opposite ; but I am sure it has quite upset us, and only heard of it last night."

"And living so close, too, could hardly be mistaken, with a window as you may say overlooking, and then so sharp besides."

"You mean old cat Johnstone," said Robert irreverently.

"Robert!" said his mother.

"Well, so she is ; but for once I shouldn't wonder if she spoke the truth. Do you mean about Joyce ?"

"Oh, well now, to think of your guessing ; but you young men are so knowing, and then such a friend, of course you would know, but so odd !"

"So very, and after thinking the other, quite, one may say almost a shock ; not but that of course we are delighted too !"

“Oh, quite!” said Miss Sackett, taking up the thread again, “and such a relief too, though so young.”

“But so very nice, and quite, I am sure, unexpected.”

“Well, I don’t know if I ought to say anything,” said Mrs. Hyde; “but as you seem to have heard, I suppose it can’t matter much.”

“And they truly are?” asked Miss Sackett.

“Really so?” asked Miss Mary.

“Well, hardly altogether so,” said Mrs. Hyde—“that is, it isn’t quite settled yet, you know; but we all think, the Arch-deacon thinks, that there cannot be any doubt about it.”

“Well, I should never have thought it!” exclaimed Miss Sackett; ‘though of course very suitable and nice and all that, but still so very insignificant compared—we will not

ntion names—but so very—well, to say
least, *little*."

"And of course not had the same ad-
ntages; such a short time in Charrington,
I really such a vast difference in style."

"But of course extremely gratifying,
ugh naturally not what one would
ect."

Indeed, just the reverse, and naturally
little disappointed as I am sure we are,
still so very nice."

Robert had dropped behind, and Mrs.
de in a low voice, looking anxiously
ut her as if she might be overheard by
e stick or stone lying in ambush among
e weeds by the roadside, said confi-
ntially :

"Of course you won't mention it, but I
ay say to you it was a surprise—in fact a
ost decided surprise, as we naturally
ought, from what we had observed, quite

otherwise ; in fact I had quite made up my mind, so of course it was rather—well, not perhaps a disappointment, for of course she is our niece, but still, you understand—”

“ Oh, quite, quite !” said Miss Sackett.

“ Oh, so very !” said Miss Mary, and then both ladies united in—

“ So much nicer otherwise, but still so nice !”

“ Oh yes,” said Mrs. Hyde, “ of course we are very pleased on the whole, though as you say, it was a little shock at first. But I believe it is quite settled now though nothing has been said since ; and he is coming again on Wednesday.”

“ No, really !” said both the ladies, as though Sir Ethelred’s appearing again on the scene was the most extraordinary thing in the world.

“ Yes,” said Mrs. Hyde ; “ and of course nothing is to be said until then.”

Oh no, not for worlds!" cried both the
es again; and as by this time they had
hed the church-porch, nothing more
d be said on the subject, though Miss
y's lips appeared to form the words
'very," as she walked up the aisle.

Directly the service was over, and before
more respectable part of the congrega-
on had left their seats, Walter appeared
e curtain that screened the organ and
ry from profane eyes and looked across
church at his cousin. She, appearing
nderstand the signal, rose, and they
the church together before Robert and
ther were out of their surplices.

"We shall not see anybody to speak to
" Walter said, as they left the church-

No. I am so glad," said Joyce, hurry-
on beside him. "It was very good of
to be so quick, Walter."

He smiled as she looked gratefully at him, but made no reply. Presently, however, he said :

“ I think I can understand and appreciate your reasons for acting as you do in this matter, Joyce.”

It was the first time he had ever said anything on the subject, and it called up the hot blood into Joyce’s cheeks.

“ Oh, don’t talk about it ! ” she cried. “ It’s bad enough for other people to do that ! For goodness’ sake, don’t make me do it too ! ”

“ I am glad to see that the subject is ~~a~~ distastful to you as it is to me,” he answered with a certain sort of satisfaction in his neat little tones.

She made no reply. They had just got to the top of the low rise of ground where the road branched off to the village. Joyce’s eyes fell on the stile on which she had sat swing-

g her feet the first day she came to Charlton. A sudden pang crossed her as she looked at the place where she had first met Austin Leybourne, and a swift colour assed into her cheeks. Walter, seeing it, thought that it was his approval that had been so welcome to her, and a corresponding faint tinge of hope dyed for an instant her thin face.

His cousin's next words cheered him still more.

"Walter, will you take me for a long, long walk one day this week?" she said. "I want to go down in the marshes. I have not been there for a long time. You can fish if you like while I gather flowers."

"I shall be delighted," he said. "Shall go to-morrow?"

"No, Tuesday," she replied. "We will fish 'Julius Cæsar' to-morrow. We will

go on Tuesday after dinner, and stay until dusk. Shall we?"

"I shall enjoy doing so very much," he said, in tones so different from his ordinary grave ones that had she been less pre-occupied with her own thoughts she must have noticed them.





CHAPTER IX.

HESE were not pleasant days for Sir Ethelred Ashton. At one time he was tortured by doubts and fears, at another time mad with hope and delight ; but oftenest he was downcast, brooding and despairing.

His mother tried to cheer him.

“ Nonsense, my dear boy,” she would say to him. “ You attach a great deal too much importance to the girl’s whims. All girls have their whims and fancies. I am sure I had. Why, I refused your father three times before I accepted him. No girl wants to act as though she threw her-

self at a man's head, and was ready to say 'Yes' the moment she was asked to do so. I think all the better of her for showing a little discretion. Cheer up, my dear Ethelred; the girl is sure to have you. She tells you there is no one else. You are not so sure of that? Why, who can there be? She has never seen anybody else. It is ridiculous to suppose that some absurd backwoodsman captivated her fancy before she came here; and if he had, he would not have a chance now; and she has seen nobody else. Trust a woman to know women, and *I* say I look upon the whole thing as settled. It is absurd to think otherwise; in fact, I have written to-day to the Chelmsfields about rooms at Ems, as I should like to be near them. You must not be later than early September, and then you can go to Scotland. You may take my word for it, it is all right."

"Well, I hope so too, mother," he answered, cheered by her confidence. "And you really do think I may hope?"

"I am perfectly certain of it," she replied. "The girl's manner to myself was sufficient. Why, my dear boy, you don't think the girl an absolute goose, do you? Now, go and order my ponies. I shall drive round to Shere Court and see Mrs. Leybourne. It is ages since I have called there."

"I would come with you," he said, as later on he handed her into her bright little carriage; "only I promised Bob to drive him to see Stapleton's new mare."

"My dear boy, don't think of such a thing. Bob is a much better companion for you than I am; besides, he can give you the latest news of your 'young lady.' Bye, bye, dear boy; my love to her."

And Lady Ashton drove away. She

was quite as confident of her son's success as she had professed herself to be ; and during her drive busied her mind with her plans for the winter, and the particular costume she should get for the wedding. She was so full of these thoughts that she had barely recovered from them sufficiently to thank Austin Leybourne as he helped her out of her carriage at his door.

“ You will quite cheer my mother,” he said. “ She has been wishing to speak to you, but she so rarely goes out now. It is very good of you to come first.”

“ Oh !” she cried, in her bright merry way, “ I have not come without an excuse, I assure you. I really have the most charming piece of news, and I suppose I ought not to part with it ; but among such old friends it will be quite safe.”

She did not notice how very pale her listener turned as he conducted her through

the dark hall into the old wainscoted drawing-room ; nor how his hand trembled as it pulled at his long moustache while he stood in the embrasure of one of the deep windows during her greeting to his mother.

Mrs. Leybourne was unusually pleased to see her visitor. The two women were widely different in every respect, and the elder one considered the younger a vain, giddy, frivolous person ; but the husbands of both had been dear friends, and this remembrance, and their seeing so little of each other, kept the widows on pleasant terms.

Lady Ashton was not long before she came to the object of her visit.

“ I really have the most charming piece of news,” she said. “ You will never guess what it is, so I must tell you ; but let me beg of you not to mention it for a few days. What do you think of Ethelred’s marrying ? ”

“ Think of it,” said Mrs. Leybourn ;
“ well, I think he is a great deal too young
to think of such things.”

She glanced towards her son as she
spoke, but his face was turned away from
her, and he was looking out of the window ;
and his hand still played with his mouth .
There was a tremulousness about the long,
thin fingers that the old lady noticed — she
had sharp eyes for everything that con-
cerned her son.

“ No ; do you really think so ?” said
Lady Ashton. “ Well, I don’t agree with
you in the least. Why, he is twenty-three ;
quite elderly, in fact. I can’t tell you the
relief it is to me that it is all over.”

Mrs. Leybourne looked surprised, but
merely asked :

“ Who is the girl ?”

“ Oh, that I am sure you would never
guess,” cried Lady Ashton, with a little

h and a light clap of her hands ; “ and
n sure it quite took me by surprise,
i knowing Ethelred’s ways as I do—
ng men are always running after pretty
s. I couldn’t tell you the agonies I
e endured over his fancies. I really
think it would have been a baker’s
ghter at one time, and the girl was
uisite ; but this is something quite
rent—it’s the Archdeacon’s little niece.
re ! what do you think of my news ?”
nd her ladyship threw herself back in
chair and laughed outright.

Mrs. Leybourne looked quickly at her

She could only see the back of his
i, for he had turned more away from
n both ; but she saw that his hand was
e quiet now, and laid across his mouth.
stood perfectly still, with his head a little
wn back as though still listening. She
so absorbed in looking at him that

Lady Ashton had to repeat her question, “ Well, what do you think of it ? ” before she answered her.

“ I congratulate you of course, if you are pleased ; but isn’t she very young ? Austin called her a child.”

Lady Ashton shrugged her shoulders.

“ All the better for Ethelred ; she can have had no prior attachment, and I have no doubt will make him a devoted wife. She seemed a bright, affectionate little thing, and very pretty. I am glad it was not one of those dreadfully cold cousins of hers. I never could get on with prim people, especially when they are masterful, as I am sure those girls are. Now this is a sweet little creature, and no doubt will give in to Ethelred in everything. I think they will be a charming couple. What do you think of it, Mr. Leybourne ? ” she said, suddenly turning round to him.

He came out of his corner and took a seat beside her. His face was very pale, but it was usually that, and his manner very grave and quiet.

“I am rejoiced to hear it,” he said; “I am sure Ethelred has found a very sweet noble-hearted little wife, and I believe he will make an excellent husband;” and again he gave a tug at his moustache, possibly to hide a nervous twitch about his lips that came at the conclusion of his speech.

“Thank you,” she said gaily. “Yes, I am very much pleased at the affair; and I only hope they won’t keep me waiting too long, for I want to go to Ems for the winter. Mrs. Leybourne, you ought to follow my example, and get this big boy of yours married too; he sets a shocking example to all the young men about by remaining single so long. Why don’t you provide him with a bride, and come to

Ems with me ? I am positive it will do your rheumatism good, and it will be so delightful."

"I know of course that Austin will marry," said Mrs. Leybourne, in a resigned manner, stroking some imaginary crease out of her rich old silk dress ; "that I am prepared for, and have been daily expecting these many years. I trust I shall be resigned to bear my lot when it does come; but to further it, nay more, to glory in it, Heaven forbid !

"Good gracious ! why ?" said Lady Ashton, rather taken aback by the solemnity of the other's manner.

"Austin," said his mother gravely, "has known neither care, nor trouble, nor sorrow, nor anxiety since he has been born. All of these that would otherwise have fallen in his way *I* have borne. Can I expect that any wife, however devoted, will do for him

what I have done? Will any other woman devote herself to his interests and bear the burdens of his life as *I* have done? It would not be possible. The moment Austin marries, his troubles begin. The old proverb is a true one."

Austin's looks, as he leant back in his low chair with his hand still about his mouth and his dark eyes fixed upon the carpet in moody communing with himself, did not present a very favourable specimen of the efficacy of his mother's system. Lady Ashton thought, as she looked at him, that she had never seen a moodier or more unhappy looking young man. He had evidently been too deeply occupied with his own thoughts to pay any attention to his mother's words, and did not even appear to know that she had spoken. As she waited apparently for an answer, Lady Ashton made it instead.

"Oh, but don't you think you are mistaken?" she said. "Of course one knows that a mother must feel for her son what no one else can, but from the son's point of view, you know, it may be different. One must not be selfish over one's children. Now I have let Ethelred have his own way entirely, and I am sure I think it has answered very well,"—"better than yours," her eyes said, as they again rested on the listless figure.

"Your son holds a different position to mine," said Mrs. Leybourne, looking at Austin, though addressing her remarks to her visitor; "he has money, and money means every luxury and freedom. His wife would hold a very different position, and might be a very different person from Austin's. A gay pleasure-loving butterfly would do very well for a man who has means to support her extravagances; for my son such a union would be ruin."

“ Well, you give my poor little daughter-law a pretty character,” said Lady Ashton, ardly knowing whether to laugh or be ffended.

Before Mrs. Leybourne could reply, Austin did so.

“ My mother cannot use those observations with regard to Miss Hyde,” he said, for the simple reason that she does not know anything about her.”

“ Oh, I am glad to hear you say that,” cried Lady Ashton, quite restored to her usual good temper, “because, although Ethelred has a fair income, an extravagant wife would soon ruin him. There is nothing so dreadful as one of those extravagant women.”

“ I know, of course, very little of Miss Hyde,” he said, again tugging at his mous-ache, while his eyes sought the carpet ; but from that little I feel enabled to give

the most unqualified dissent from such opinion of her. Miss Hyde appears to : to have the foundations of a very fi character, and she is decidedly clever a self-reliant."

"Well, I like her," said Lady Ashto rising to go. "You must come and me her at lunch, Mrs. Leybourne. I am su you will think she is a sweet little creatu And do think of Ems ; I am convinced would do you good, and the most delight people are going there. Why not come any case ? Austin can take care of himse I am sure. Well, good-bye, good-bye."

Austin went with her to the door. T ponies had been driven round by the m and the two stood on the doorstep waiti for them to be brought.

"What a romantic old place you ha here," she said with a smile, looking rour her ; "too gloomy, though, for everyd

life. Why don't you brighten it up a little ? It would be sweetly pretty and old-fashioned then."

" Why should it be done ?" he said, gloomily leaning against the doorway ; " it will last our time, and then it shall be pulled down."

" Good gracious, why ?"

" It has done enough harm in its time," he answered. " You can't live among old timbers, and tottering walls, and stagnant water, and overgrown trees, and damp, and shadows, without their having their own dreary influence over you. You see what she has come to," and he looked towards the drawing-room, " and you see what I am ; fit only to be left to rust away out of sight, and then forgotten."

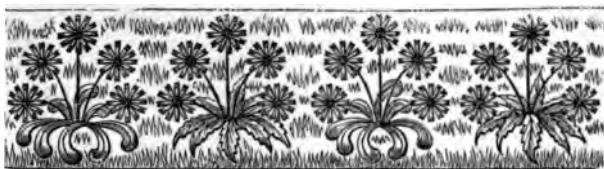
" Why, you gloomy creature," said Lady Ashton, trying to speak brightly, yet rather awed by the other's stern melan-

choiy. "you are not so much older than Ethneird?"

"I am old enough in thoughts and heart to be his grandfather," he said, helping her into her carriage. "God bless both him and her! Give my heartiest congratulations to them both," he added, pressing her hand as he turned away.

"Really that is the most awful state of things," she said to herself, as with a shiver she glanced back at the shadowed old house. "I declare I feel as if I had been in a grave conversing with the dead! Well, my system against theirs, anyway!" and Lady Ashton drove home.





CHAPTER X.

HE marshes were looking their best on that hot summer afternoon when Walter and his cousin went down to them. Autumn had come, and with it that sultry, still weather that sometimes deigns to visit these chilly, fog-laden shores. The way to the marshes that the cousins took was first through Ashton village, that looked more than ordinarily wrapt in drowsy slumber, with the children at school, and not a breath of wind stirring the flowers in the cottage gardens or loosening the ripening fruit from the stalks of the orchard trees that overhung the road.

Leaving the village, they passed into a little lane of a wild, unkempt nature, accessible enough now after the long continuance of dry weather, but impassable at any other time, as was evident from the dried mud that stood in ridges where cart-wheels had made ruts of a foot in depth. The hedges on each side of this path, now half grass-grown, were a perfect wilderness of black-berry-bushes, briony, long feathery meadow-sweet, sloe-bushes, and all manner of wild flowers and leaves.

Joyce was finding new treasures at every step ; and Walter, who seemed in no particular hurry to get to his fishing or anywhere else, lingered with her, and even so far forgot his classicalism and his duties as a tutor as to scramble into the hedge after her to look at and extricate a little bird that had got caught in some brambles.

As the lane approached the marshes, it

grew wilder and more straggling, and patches of sedges and long reeds grew beside the path. Then it narrowed again, and was almost choked with long grass and shadowed by low-growing willows, until finally it reached a little copse and some two or three wild fields with mounds covered with blackberry-bushes in them, and clear, silent dykes beyond their limits.

Walter got over the gate from the lane, and was going to help his cousin over, but she was by his side before he had expected her to begin the performance, and so they walked on.

“Oh, do listen, Walter!” she cried. “There are doves in that wood—I am sure there are.”

“Very likely,” he said. “There are a great many birds about here, so few people come here; and the place is so quiet that often-times quite rare birds make their appear-

ance, and may even build here, for all I know. I have seen kingfishers and herons here often."

"Oh, I should like to see one now," she cried, clapping her hands and dancing about. "It is so lovely to get right away from everybody; only it isn't at all right away like father and I used to get when we were hundreds of miles from a town. I do feel so crowded up here sometimes, I don't know whatever to do; appears I can hardly breathe anyway."

"I can hardly understand your feeling that in Charrington," he said, not particularly liking her relapsing into American colloquialisms. "The neighbourhood is really very thinly inhabited. What should you say to living in a city, for instance?"

"I should just gasp and die," she answered carelessly, not thinking how soon she might have an experience of city life.

‘ I guess I couldn’t exist among a mob of people ; I should want to be by myself so dreadfully.’

“ There is no place in which you can be so lonely as in a great city, where you are absolutely unknown,” he said.

“ No, really ?” she asked, looking at him as if the idea was a new one to her. “ Well, I don’t know that you are not right, after all,” she added musingly, “ for I never felt one-half or quarter so lonely in the woods when father had gone hunting, as I did in London.”

“ Just so,” he said ; “ Nature can be a great companion to those who can appreciate her” (he said this in a patronising way, as being far above any such trivial considerations himself), “ whereas in the turmoil and bustle of a large city, to a stranger rest and recognition are alike impossible.”

Joyce made him no answer ; the idea

had taken possession of her in a curious manner, yet it seemed to have no bearing upon her past or future life ; but the words, “ There is no place in which you can be so lonely as in a great city,” rang in her head.

They had strolled on through the rich grasses and beside the festooning bramble branches, until they reached the end of the third field from the lane. Here a clear dyke, called in the vernacular the “ Great Shere,” flowed silently and slowly by, and water-flowers and leaves blossomed on its bosom in its quiet places. Beyond it lay the marshes, green and golden with the grasses and flowers, and here and there grey and waving where the tall sedge-leaves hung languidly in the sunlight.

Some trees, old pollard willows and an oak or two, grew at this corner of the field ; and another dyke ran, or rather lay, behind

hem. One of the trees had been blown down many winters ago, and its trunk bereft of branches and its great bare roots lay upon the soft turf.

“This is a nice seat for you,” said Walter, as they came up. “It is rather early to begin fishing yet, so we may as well have a rest.”

“I am not tired,” she said, but she took the seat he offered her; and taking off her hat, let the soft still air bathe her temples and hair.

She looked very lovely as she sat there in her white frock, with her pure innocent face and bright thoughtful grey eyes. The flickering shadow of the willows fell on her, and let spots of sunlight in upon the waving misty hair that was twisted about her shapely head. She was a little graver, a little more thoughtful about the brow, than when she had first come to Charrington; but

the dimples and the freshness of her wild-rosebud face were still there.

Walter looked at her as he came back after fixing his rod by means of some branches where the float could lie on the water. He was not an imaginative man, and possibly possessed of no very keen sense of beauty; neither was he an emotional man, his desires and his feelings all being kept strictly in due order and propriety ever since he could walk—and before then for aught anyone knew to the contrary—but just now, in spite of all the training he had undergone, he was sensible of a very decided stirring of his heart and quickening of his pulse as he walked slowly towards his pretty cousin.

She took no notice of his heightened colour or his nervous faltering manner; her eyes were fixed upon the smooth reflecting water, and in a slow dreamy way she was

following its course to Shere Court, and seeing the reflection of the saffron evening primroses in it, as on that night of her first visit to Austin's home.

Walter disturbed her dreams by saying :

“ I am very glad, Joyce, that you wished to come here to-day, as it has given me an opportunity of speaking to you quietly on a subject that has been much in my thoughts lately.”

“ Oh no, don't,” she said, thinking she knew to what he must allude. “ I am sick of thinking of it and watching other people think of it ; do let me have this afternoon in peace, Walter.”

“ You are somewhat mistaken as to what my intentions are,” he replied. “ It is true I did mean to allude to Ethelred Ashton, but only in passing ; and so far from spoiling this afternoon for you, it is my most

earnest hope and desire to make it happier for you and for me," he added confusedly.

"Well," she said with a little sigh, taking her eyes away from the shining water, and resignedly folding her hands in her lap, "what is it?"

"First of all, I trust you will not mind my asking you a question that certainly bears upon the subject you, in my opinion very properly, dislike. Believe me I would not now approach it were it not essential that I should be fully and firmly convinced upon this point before proceeding."

"Well, what is it?" she said again, as he paused for a reply. Her indifferent manner and the longing way in which her eyes roved over the green marshy meadows ought to have shown him that he was not possessed of her interest, but he was too much absorbed in the pursuance of his own thoughts.

“The question is,” he said, “do you consider yourself to be in any way engaged to Sir Ethelred?”

“No, certainly not!” she said angrily, while a swift red dyed her cheeks at the mention of his name.

“Not bound to him even until Wednesday—to-morrow—in any way?” he persisted.

“No, not in any way at all!” she said hotly; “I gave him his answer at the time, and if he wouldn’t take it I can’t help it. He knows he has nothing more to expect from me!” and she would have got up and gone away from her questioner, but he detained her by his hand.

“Thank you,” he said; “and believe me I would never have put you to the pain of answering such a question did it not involve very serious consequences for me. You have certainly been aware, Joyce, that your

conduct has met with my fullest approbation."

"Yes, I know that," she answered, still a little impatiently, "and I am glad of it."

"Thank you," he said; "but what I wish to explain, Joyce, are my motives and reasons for so thinking."

"No, don't," she said, giving a little annoyed twitch to herself, which Walter took advantage of to come closer to her, but she did not notice it. "I don't want to know reasons—let it be; I am grateful to you for not misunderstanding me as everybody else has done, isn't that enough?"

"No, it is not enough," he said, and the words seemed to come with great difficulty out of him; "I must tell you why I approve. Joyce, it is because I believe you to be far superior to anything Ethelred Ashton can ever be, or bring you to."

"Oh, nonsense!" she said, jumping down

and giving herself a little shake, as if to get rid of him and his opinions too.

“It is not nonsense, Joyce,” he said, rising and coming close to her—“it is far from that; it is because I believe you to be one of the purest and best of women that I say so.”

He was so much in earnest, and his little deep-set eyes were shining with such suppressed emotion, that her careless answer died away upon her lips and her face paled as she looked at him.

“I am glad to see you are regarding this matter as serious, Joyce,” he said, conquering the rising desire to break out into a rapid declaration of his love for her; “because, I assure you, it is most serious to me. Has it ever occurred to you to ask yourself, Joyce, why I have taken this view of the matter?”

self at a man's
'Yes' the man
I think all the
little discretion
red; the girl
you there is
sure of that
She has never
ridiculous to
backwoodsmen
she came here
have a chance
nobody else
women, and /
thing as setti
otherwise; in
the Chelmsford
should like to
not be later
then you can
take my word

cence. You can now comprehend, Joyce, **why** I have taken such an interest in the **development** of your mind. It was in the **delightful** hope that some day you will **become** the partner of my life!" and again **he** looked into her eyes.

She turned away her head and gave a **little** stamp with her foot, as she exclaimed **with** a vehemence that considerably **astonished** him :

" Oh, this is too horridly *disgusting!*"

" What!" he cried, scarcely believing his **ears.** " Joyce, do you use such a word as **that?**"

" Yes, I do," she said, turning upon him **with** the tears welling up into her eyes. " I don't know whatever has come to people. I can't make friends with anybody but it all turns out horrid. I never was so worried —never!" and she wrung her hands. " It is disgusting, horribly disgusting, that I

can't even have a cousin or a friend without this sort of thing happening. I didn't think *you* would have done it ;" and she looked reproachfully at him through her tears.

"And why not, may I ask ?" he said coldly, for her words had stung him deeply.

"Oh, but you are a *cousin*," she said. "What could make you think of such a thing ? I didn't mean to hurt you," she went on, seeing his white face before her, "and really I am very, very sorry. I suppose I have been stupid again ; but how could you make such a mistake ?"

"I see that I have done that," he said, and he turned from her and went towards his fishing-rod. He did not attempt to touch it however, though the float gave one or two promising bobs, but stood with folded arms looking down upon the water. She stole up to him and touched his arm softly.

“I am very sorry,” she whispered; “please forgive me.”

“You are old enough to know that your words have some power in them to wound,” was his reply.

“Oh, I am sorry!” she cried. “I didn’t know I could hurt anybody so much. Do look at me and shake hands, Walter!”

He gave her his hand. It felt cold and rather clammy, and its touch frightened her.

“Oh, I am so sorry!” she began, with the tears upon her cheeks, when he stopped her with—

“It is over now; let us say no more.”

“Very well,” she said, a little nettled in her turn by his cold air. “We will say no more. I should like to go down the marshes. Shall I find you here when I come back at sunset?”

“Yes, at sunset,” he replied mechanically,

and still stood with folded arms looking at the stream.

She longed to say another word expressive of her sorrow for his pain, but she dared not; and moving silently away, she crossed the dyke behind the trees by means of a narrow plank of wood, and walked away down the flowery marshes, tearful and harassed by this new discovery. She was a great deal more distressed by it than her manner had shown, for it opened up a series of new perplexities to her in her home-life. She knew perfectly well that her intended final rejection of Sir Ethelred would not be accomplished without a good deal of firmness on her own part, and a great deal of opposition on her uncle's side. She was prepared for a struggle, and even some amount of unpleasantness, but she had never calculated upon any fresh complications of this sort. The manner, too, in

which Walter had taken her refusal of him certainly predicted disagreeable experiences for the future ; and Joyce sighed heavily as she saw a world of troubles spreading out before her.

At any other time she would have enjoyed seeing the wide-spread rolling green intersected by gleaming water that lay before her. The flowers her feet pressed under at every step would have possessed tender charms of their own for her had she been the light-hearted girl she was when first she ran with Robert over these same wide marshes. But she was sorrowful and heavy-hearted now, and her feet moved languidly, and her eyes saw neither the beauty of the scene nor the flowers under her steps. She walked on for a long way, neither noticing the distance nor in what direction her feet were leading her. It was not until she saw some one coming towards

her down the straight grass path that lay between two dykes that she noticed where she was.

Escape was impossible, even had she desired it ; and though she dreaded seeing him again after the discovery she had lately made of her own heart's feelings, yet the turn her thoughts had taken during the last hour made her welcome this opportunity of meeting him much as if it had been her last. He was a long way off when she saw him first, but the straight paths between the dykes ran sometimes for miles in those lonely marshes, so she had plenty of time to arrange her thoughts before he came up to her.

She fully expected that he would be ignorant of the offer that had been made to her. Looking upon it in her own mind as over and done with, except as to convincing her uncle, she never doubted



that Sir Ethelred had kept both his offer and its rejection as a secret. While resolving so to guard her face and speech as that no remote guess could be made at the truth of her feelings towards himself, Joyce expected to find in Austin Leybourne the same open sympathy and friendship that she had always received from him. Consequently she was astonished, not to say a little offended, at the extreme stiffness of his manner towards her, that seemed to say by its cold civility that this meeting was not particularly agreeable to him.

“Are you alone?” he asked her, after they had shaken hands.

“No,” she said. “Walter is fishing near the copse.”

“That is some distance from here,” he said. “You have nearly come to my house.”

"Have I? I didn't mean to," she answered, in some confusion. "I did not notice where I was going;" and she turned and began to walk back towards the fields.

He kept by her, and presently, when she stole a look at him, she saw that he was very pale, and had a certain worn and haggard look upon him, as if he had had sleepless nights.

"You are not looking very well," she said to him quickly; then stopped and coloured at his look of surprise.

"I am quite well," he said. "When men get to my time of life they rarely look as robust as younger men."

She was puzzled and annoyed at his change.

"Have you gone on with your observations lately?" she asked him, to change the conversation.

"No; and I never shall now," he

answered. "All that has gone like the rest—an idle dream!"

"You said you would let me help you," she urged timidly.

He gave her one long, wistful look out of his dark eyes.

"You will have other and far more interesting claims upon your attention in the future," he said, still regarding her with that strange wistfulness in his eyes. "Best forget my dreams; they concern none but myself, and not even myself very much. If I did think at one time that I might have been useful and honoured in my generation, all that has gone by. Believe me, there is nothing in my discoveries or studies that will not soon be, if they are not already, the property of some worthier and happier man than myself. And why should I seek to take what little profit and honour may be had among men of science from one to

whom such profit and honour may be the means of making his existence a pleasant and useful one? They could do nothing of the sort for me now, so why should I selfishly take what may be another man's bread?"

"I do not like to hear you talk like this," she said, raising her timid eyes to his face for an instant, and then letting them droop again; "I had hoped that you were going to do the great things you are capable of."

"You mistake my capabilities," he said, "and you are untrue to yourself in so mistaking them. Did you not tell me once, not so very long ago in days, that you believed in success? Well, I have not succeeded, so the chances are that there is very little in me or I should have succeeded. Men who deserve to succeed generally do so."

"If I said that, I was wrong," she said, with her eyes still cast down, "because I know you could succeed if you tried."

"Perhaps I do not care to try," he said in an indifferent manner as he strode along beside her, pulling at his moustache in a moody, thoughtful way.

She wondered what had come to him to make him so dull a companion. He had always been cheerful with her before in a quaint, half-tender, half-amused fashion, that contrasted strangely with his fixed gloominess of to-day. She scarcely liked to say anything more to him ; he took in such ill part what she had already said, so she too walked in thoughtful silence, wondering why all about her changed and varied in this uncomfortable manner. It was hard, she felt, that this man whom she had regarded as her one true friend should at this crisis of her life fail her, as he seemed

inclined to do, in all true sympathy and friendship.

They walked along the wide grass-grown track between the shining dykes, with the broad flag-leaves and tufted meadow-sweet fringing the path on either hand. Far away over the great flats a dim blue mist was rising as the sun neared the farther faint grey hills. Some little brown birds flew past them, flying low over the waters, and showing the reflection of their white breasts on its smooth surface. They uttered at times a little faint cry as they fluttered by, and this was the only sound that fell upon the soft evening air.

It was so quiet, so peaceful, their footsteps even were not heard upon the rich, soft grass, and they had walked on so long together without speaking a word, both deep in their own thoughts, that Austin started when Joyce said to him :

“Do you know anything of London?”

The question was so far removed from his train of thought, and from all that lay around them, that she had to repeat it before he clearly understood her.

“Do I know London? No—very little of it,” he said, wondering why she had asked him such a question; “I have rarely been there.”

“It is easy to get lost there, is it not?” she asked.

“Very easy, I should imagine. All great towns are easy places to hide in; but why do you ask?”

“Walter said just now that great towns were such lonely places,” she answered, with some confusion, “and—and I was thinking of what he said.”

“I know very little of London,” he said, “and that little is of a part you will probably never see. I had something to do

with an association for helping friendless foreigners once ; but it came to little. We were very much imposed upon, I believe. But you will see nothing of the sights I saw in the part of London you will go to."

" That I shall go to ?" she asked him, with a little throb at her heart that sent the blood rushing into her face. Could he know what she had been thinking of during this last hour or two ?

" Yes," he said, looking at her furtively, as he again pulled his moustache with no tender hand. " Of course you will go to London ?"

His words made her vaguely uncomfortable. How could he know her thoughts that she herself had barely put into shape yet ?

" When I go to London ?" she repeated nervously.

" Yes, when you are married," he said,

looking coolly at her, while his hand still tugged at that drooping moustache. "I believe Sir Ethelred has a town-house."

She understood him now. So he, too, had heard this of her, and believed that she was going to sell herself for a title, and lands and money, as they had all thought. There had been no word of faintest suspicion of love for Sir Ethelred on her part ever spoken. Nobody had ever seemed to think it worth while to consider such a thing as at all necessary ; it was enough that he had done her the honour to offer her all this grandeur and wealth, and it was taken for granted that she would barter herself for it. She had never so fully realised the case until now that she heard it from the lips of the man she loved, and it filled her with anger and indignation the like of which she had never felt before. That this man, who of all others she believed

to have known and understood her, should yet have this base opinion of her—that he considered it as a settled thing that at the first opportunity she should sell her maidenhood and her life for rank and wealth ! He did not even ask her if such were the case. He had heard the rumour of Sir Ethelred's offer, and, like everyone else, immediately took it for granted that she would so sell herself. He of all others must know that she did not love Sir Ethelred. Had he not said so no longer ago than last Tuesday when he came and sat beside her at the garden-party ? She was too deeply hurt to betray her feelings in words. In that moment her heart turned from him with a hardness she had never believed herself capable of feeling. If he believed that of her, she at least would not undeceive him ; let time and subsequent events do that.



She did not blush, she turned a deadly white instead ; but she turned her face aside that he should not see it, and as she stooped to pick a flower beside her feet, she said in a voice whose cold disdainful sharpness sounded strange to herself :

“Of course, I forgot that. It is a fine thing to have a town-house, and two country-houses, is it not ?” and she gave a little hard laugh.

He turned away—she felt that he turned away from her in disdain.

“I hope you will enjoy them,” he said quietly.

“Oh, no fear of that,” she said, speaking in a hard boastful manner. “You see it is such a good match for me—I believe I ought to be very grateful for the honour. My mother was only a poor servant-girl, you know ! It is really a great deal more

than I could expect ; but you have not congratulated me yet ! " and she turned round and held out her hand.

He paused a moment before taking it, and though she did not intend to look at him, the power of his eyes upon her forced her to raise hers to him. They were fixed upon her with a look of such unutterable sadness that for a moment her own quailed before them ; but then the thought that this but confirmed his belief in her degradation hardened her still more.

" What, have you not a single good wish to give me before making such a brilliant marriage ? " she said gaily.

" I hope you will be happy," he said, taking her hand and holding it for a second in his icy cold one.

" That sounds as if you very much doubted the fact," she said saucily, flinging her flower away.

“God knows, I wish it from my very heart,” he said gravely.

His sincerity and the sorrow of his tones almost unnerved her; and as she stooped to gather another flower her fingers trembled violently, but his next words ended this passing tenderness.

“I fear that my manner may have expressed some little astonishment,” he said, “and I feel that I have no right to be astonished. It was the most natural thing to expect. I must ask you to excuse any unintentional incivility of manner, and to remember that my lonely life has kept me much away from the world and its ways. I had no right to be surprised—I must ask your forgiveness for seeming so.”

“No, you had no right,” she said, still stooping on one knee upon the grass, her fingers busy among the flowers. She spoke

so low that he had to bend his head to hear her.

“ But you will forgive me ?” he asked her, still bending over her.

She took a long time to answer him, and her lap was full of torn-up tender little grasses and plants pulled ruthlessly from their homes before she said :

“ Yes, I will forgive you !”

There were great tears in her eyes, and a trembling all over her, but she would not look up.

“ Good-bye,” she said, rising, and holding out her hand to him. “ I see Walter waiting for me under the trees ; good-bye.”

He took her hand, and held it as he had often held it before between both his own. He did not let it go, neither did he answer her. She stood looking down into the clear silent dyke before her with the reflection of the soft evening clouds rising slowly in the

west upon it, and he stood looking down at her bent head.

Some great yearning hunger for what might have been seized him, and a fierce longing to tell her that he knew the path she had chosen would not be for her own happiness. He knew enough of her to know that such a union would bring but shame and bitterness to her. The shame he saw already in the bent head and the shrinking form ; the bitterness would only come when all succour would be too late.

He longed to speak to her, to warn her ; but how could he do so ? How could he tell her that her affianced lover was unworthy of her ; how tell her to her face that she was selling herself for gold, she whom he had deemed as pure and innocent as the flowers in her lap ? He could not bring himself to speak the words that would have been an insult to her to hear. He could

do nothing but stand by and see her degrade herself, and mourn fruitlessly over her broken, soiled life.

“Good-bye,” he said at last. “God help you, and bless you!”

Her lips quivered, but no sound came from them. Her hand seemed turned to ice, it felt so deadly cold. He pressed it again, and with another “good-bye” upon his lips, turned and left her.

She remained standing where she was as he walked slowly away; he turned and looked at her several times. A doubt of the wisdom of what he was doing came over him. Was he doing right in leaving her there in her youth and loneliness without a solitary word of warning? Did she know what she was doing? He stopped and half-turned to come back to her once; but a fear that in saying anything he might say too much restrained him. He could

not trust himself to go near her again. Again he looked back. She was standing where he had left her, still looking down into the silent dyke. Presently he saw her drop something into it, one of the flowers she had pulled up. She watched it for a moment as he watched her, saw it float away half-sinking, and threw another and another after it, dropping them slowly and musingly one after the other until they were all gone. He walked on, turning often ; and, as long as he could see her, he saw her slender figure with the soft, clinging white dress about it that the dying sun was now staining blood-red, standing with her eyes fixed upon the dyke and her head bent low. So he passed on out of sight, and soon the grey willows of his waste garden were before him, with their mossy tassels quivering in the breeze and meeting their own weird reflections in the black water below.

He saw his sombre house black in the deep shadows looming out of the evening greyness before him. Not even the saffron of the evening primroses lighted like dim stars the path before the door. They were dead and gone, like his youth, and his hopes, and his joys. He lifted the latch and went in. There was no one there but the stern old woman, sitting in her arm-chair by the empty hearth, brooding moodily over the ghosts of her dead past.

Joyce still stood by the dyke. How long she would have stayed there, but for Walter, she did not know. She had become oblivious of time and her surroundings, save for the consciousness that she stood alone in all the world, and that the one friend of her solitary life had left her for ever. In some dim way her mind was busy with fashioning her future. She took an almost morbid pleasure in seeing herself alone and

neglected, taking her unnoticed way among the busy throngs of London. She would never trouble anyone more with her presence, never bear what she had borne to-day ; if unloved, she would not be dishonoured.

She was roused from her reverie by Walter's voice calling her from the copse.

“ Joyce, it is late ; are you ready ?”

“ Yes, quite ready,” she said, raising her head. “ I will come now.”





CHAPTER XL

THERE was very little said on the walk home. Joyce was too full of thoughts roused and intensified by the meeting with Austin Leybourne to feel her companion, and Walter was mortified and angry over his recent rejection, and the indignity that he considered to have been put upon him. The evening had closed in heavily, too: after that first lurid gleam of red, thick black clouds had come up and overcast the sky; soon a few heavy drops fell, and then a sullen splashing shower.

They were just at the end of the lane

when the rain came down, and Walter hurried Joyce on. She seemed perfectly indifferent at the prospect of a wetting, and unwilling to take shelter under a cart-shed that stood beside some hay-ricks in a farm-yard they came by.

“I don’t mind ; I am quite used to getting wet : let me go home,” she pleaded.

But he was firm.

“ I cannot think of allowing you to go on in such rain, in your thin dress,” he said ; “ my mother would be much displeased. Come in here ; it is quite clean and dry.”

“ Well, where have you two been ?” said a familiar voice, as they stepped into the deep shadow of the little shed. “ If it was your brother Bob, I should not be surprised ; but I thought you Oxford men knew better than to drag girls about the lanes at this time of night.”

A WESTERN WILDFLOWER.

"Mrs. Johnstone?" said Walter, lifting his hat. "How do you do?"

"Oh, I am very well; but you haven't told me where you have been."

"Fishing at Marsh End," replied Walter, while Joyce remained silent.

She had not meant even for an altercation with Mrs. Johnstone, a species of entertainment which as a rule, she by no means disliked.

"It is a very sudden shower, is it not?" Walter politely remarked, after a few moments of rather uncomfortable silence had been spent by Mrs. Johnstone in glaring at Joyce, who appeared not to notice her existence.

"Yes, very," said that lady tartly, "or I should not have been out in it."

"I am afraid it looks very like going on for some considerable time," he said, after going out and looking up at the sky.

“ It is raining very heavily now,” he continued, coming in and shrugging his shoulders ; “ it is quite unfit for you ladies to go out in. If you will remain here I will will run down to the Rectory and bring umbrellas and cloaks. Joyce, that eave is dripping on you where you are standing.”

Joyce moved a little more inside the shed, and Mrs. Johnstone replied to Walter by saying :

“ Well, I am sure I shall be glad of an umbrella and cloak too ; and if your mother has a pair of goloshes I should like them. Don’t bring the girls’, theirs will be too big.”

“ I will get them,” he said. “ Joyce, you are not cold, are you ?”

“ No, thank you,” she said, “ but I would rather come with you ; I don’t mind the rain, really.”

“ I cannot think of it,” he replied ; “ you would be wet through. I shall not be

long ;" and he splashed off through the wet, for the roads were already covered with little streams.

They both watched his tightly buttoned-up neat little figure till the turn of the road hid him from their sight. Then Mrs. Johnstone turned to her companion.

" Well, miss, so what you told me the other night doesn't seem to be true, as indeed I suspected at the time. All the place is ringing with news of your engagement."

" Bells can lie as well as people, I suppose," said Joyce languidly. She felt in no mood for a conversation with Mrs. Johnstone. " Of course everybody knows much more on the subject than I do."

" Everybody knows at least that no girl in her senses is going to refuse the best offer in the neighbourhood, however much she may pretend to the contrary."

“Perhaps I am not in my senses,” said Joyce, sitting down upon the shaft of a disused cart that stood in one corner and leaning her head back wearily. It was too dark for Mrs. Johnstone to see more of the girl than the dim outlines of her form in its white dress as she leant against the cart.

“It’s no use your pretending to me,” said the lady with a sharp snap in her tones. “I could see plainly enough what you meant at the garden-party, and when you pretended to play off that booby Austin Leybourne against young Ashton. I knew then what you were after.”

“That was a great deal more than I did.”

“Nonsense!” retorted Mrs. Johnstone sharply. “You are not going to make me believe but that Julius Hyde’s daughter is not skilled in the arts of deception.”

“Why Julius Hyde’s daughter more than Laurence Hyde’s?” asked Joyce in

so calm a tone that it misled her tormentor.

"You don't mean to tell me that you don't know your father's history?"

"Probably I do, a great deal better than you do."

"Well, I am not so sure of that," said Mrs. Johnstone contemplatively. "After all there are some things that even Julius Hyde would not tell his daughter. (I should like to know," she went on to herself, "if she does know; if she does not, it might perhaps make her ashamed to stay here. She may have at least that amount of feeling, though I very much doubt it.) Did you ever hear your father speak of Shere Court?" she asked aloud.

"Yes, often," said Joyce; but she did not seem inclined to talk, for she bent her chin upon her hand, and dreamily watched the driving rain.

“ Oh, indeed, you have,” said Mrs. Johnstone quickly. “ He mentioned Claude Leybourne, Austin’s father, as a great friend perhaps?”

“ Yes, he did,” said Joyce, paying but little heed to what she thought to be gossiping inquisitiveness.

“ Oh, indeed ; perhaps he also mentioned a certain Aspasia Leybourne, his sister—though why they ever gave the woman that name *I* never could find out.”

“ Providence alone must know in that case,” said Joyce, rousing herself for a moment, and then relapsing into her dreamy state ; “ no, I don’t remember anything about her.”

“ Ha !” said Mrs. Johnstone. “ Well, let me tell you a story. It will pass the time before your cousin comes,” she added, peering into the dusk which enveloped

Joyce, and seeing nothing of her but the glimmer of her white dress and face.

“Thank you,” said Joyce; “that will be a blessing.”

Mrs. Johnstone darted one angry look in her direction, and then began:

“Well, this sister of Claude Leybourne’s, this Aspasia—and very well she suited her heathen name, I am sure—it is about her that I am going to tell you. She was younger than Claude by several years, and had been left by their mother, who died when she was a baby, to his special care. I have heard, for I knew little of them, that she was as the apple of Claude’s eye to him. The wonder to me is that he ever married, loving this sister as he seems to have done. However, Mrs. Leybourne must know about that better than anybody else; he was always a dreamy, do-nothing sort of fellow, like his son. Did you speak?”

“No, I only moved,” said Joyce faintly ; she felt in some way that this history would concern her ; how, she did not know.

“Oh, very well ! I thought you said something. Perhaps you don’t like to hear your friend spoken of in that way, but it’s true all the same. Well, Claude Leybourne married, and his sister lived with them, and I have heard was a sort of daughter to them both, being so much younger ; and Mrs. Leybourne grew to look upon her almost as a daughter of her own. She never had a daughter, and she wished for one, as those determined women do wish for daughters to control and train ; but she never had any. She had one son, this Austin, you know. He was bright enough as a child, for all that he is so quiet now ; but that was before his mother became too much for him, or took to the dismals herself. Well, as you seem to have heard,

your father, Julius Hyde, was a very frequent visitor at the house. He and Claude were great friends at school and college, and continued the friendship in after-life. It was my opinion that Mrs. Leybourne was a little jealous of your father from the very first, for whether it was that she had no interest in her husband's fancies, which were very much like his son's—star-gazing, and geology, and what not—he always seemed to have a great deal more to say to his friend than to his wife. I don't believe, for my part, the two ever got on very well together. She was always what they call a masterful, practical woman, and had no patience with any of his fancies and whims. However, Julius Hyde was always about the house, and being always about the house of course he saw a good deal of Aspasia. The time I speak of was just after Julius's father had died; consequently, as the Deanery was all

broken up as far as they were concerned, he spent most of his time at the Leybournes'. Aspasia was then about seventeen, and an extremely pretty girl—so everybody said—of the bright rosy well-grown type ; nothing very delicate or fragile about her as I remember her. Julius Hyde seemed very fond of her—used to treat her as a sister, many said ; and a pity he didn't continue to do so, but that I dare say was only his artfulness. Anyhow the two were together a great deal, walking and riding and going about together for all the world as you and your cousins do. Nothing was said about marrying her that ever I heard of, but I suppose most people thought they were engaged. Anyhow the upshot of it was that one fine morning Julius left the Court to go back to his regiment which was ordered abroad, and they sailed from Chatham. They were going to touch at Malta, I

remember, because it was there the news of the discovery must have reached him. He stayed in London for a week before he started, and it must have been there that Aspasia joined him ; for he had no sooner sailed than they discovered that, instead of Aspasia's being, as they had supposed, on a visit at Cheltenham, she had gone off with him, and in a condition that she ought never to have got into before she was married. That was clearly proved by subsequent events, for though Claude hunted far and wide for her, he never found her ; and though he went at it, as one may say, like a madman, and never left a stone unturned to find her, the only news of her he ever got was in two paragraphs in a newspaper : the first, telling of the birth of her child ; the second, of her own death. Who sent the papers he never knew or could discover, and the tidings had such an effect upon him that he sank under

the shock. It wanted very little to kill him by that time, for his friend's treachery and his sister's disgrace had pretty well done for him from the first. Julius never came back, and nobody knew what became of him for a very long time. I suppose he must have got the tidings of Claude's death at the same time as the news that all was discovered. I suppose you have never heard your father mention Malta?"

There was a moment's pause as Mrs. Johnstone peered into the dimness, where only the faintest gleam of white was now visible. She would have given much for light to distinguish the girl's features.

"Well, has my story helped to pass the time?" she asked, with a tinge of triumph in her tones.

"Thank you, yes; any lies are welcome when one is bored," said Joyce, rising and coming forward. Her face, seen in the

dim light, frightened the elder woman, it was so deathly in hue ; and there was such a shining in the eyes that she instinctively stepped back as Joyce came close to her, and said, almost in her ear, in a voice that sounded shrill and sharp :

“ That is a lie that you have told me !”

“ Good gracious me !” cried Mrs. Johnstone, taking refuge in anger from her real fright at Joyce’s appearance. “ Well, this is pretty language to a clergyman’s wife, and your aunt’s friend !”

“ You are no friend of my aunt’s if you can believe such things of her brother-in-law !” said Joyce fiercely.

“ Highty-tighty indeed ! and you must know, Miss Impertinence, that your aunt and uncle know this to be true as much as ever I do ; and what your aunt meant by taking you over to see Mrs. Leybourne is more than I can tell. You could tell by

her manner, I should think, what she believes, for she is not one of the forgiving sort."

"I don't believe it! I won't believe it! it's a horrible wicked lie!" cried Joyce, her pent-up passion pouring forth in a rapid torrent of words. "My own blessed darling father, my own dearest purest father! to believe such a wicked, wicked lie of you! They never understood you, or loved you, any more than they do me! and they think wicked things of us both—cruel, hateful, wicked things! I'll not hear it! I won't hear it! Oh, father! if only I could come to you! They drove you away, and they will drive me away too. Oh, father! father! father!" and flinging Mrs. Johnstone, who had come near to counsel her to be quiet, from her, Joyce rushed out into the darkness and the rain.

"Well, I think that's settled," said Mrs.

Johnstone, peering out after her. "Julius Hyde should have known better than to have said that Johnstone was the only man in the county blind enough to marry me. I don't think his daughter will be Lady Ashton yet awhile. She has just his old impatient fiery spirit. I should not wonder if she ran away a bit. Oh, there is Walter! I wonder he has not met her."

"Why, where is Joyce?" he asked, as he came up and found her standing there by herself.

"She ran off into the rain," said Mrs. Johnstone, taking the cloak from him. "It strikes me your people have got rather a tartar in that girl!"

"Joyce is impetuous; she requires training," was his answer, as he helped her on with the cloak.

"Training or no training, the girl is like her father," she said, as she followed him

out. "She went towards the Rectory. I suppose you missed her there by Jem Hodge's cottage, where the turnings are. You will find her there when you get in."

"She should not have gone out," said Walter, looking anxiously about him. "It was very wrong of her."

Mrs. Johnstone made no reply, and they splashed on through the wet roads in silence.

Joyce was in the Rectory when he got there. She had come straight home like some wounded creature seeking only to hide itself. She had gone into her little room and bolted the door, answering all inquiries by saying that she was changing her clothes, and would come down presently. From mere force of habit she did take off her wet things, and as she was shivering with cold she wrapped herself in her dressing-gown and threw herself down upon the bed.

Her head was hot and burning, and her hands and feet felt icy cold. She shivered as if she were going to be ill; but not a tear came from her eyes. She could neither eat nor drink, nor make any cry; only lie there and shiver, and grow faint and dizzy now and then, as fragments of the words she had heard that day presented themselves to her mind. She was incapable of thinking of anything clearly or distinctly, or, indeed, of pronouncing properly at all. It was sufficient, and more than sufficient, to feel the heavy load-weight of her load of sorrow upon her.

She would not come down to supper. To meet the eyes of her relations who knew of this shameful history of her father was more than she could bear. She was angry with them for believing it, angry with herself for having heard it, and more angry still at the horrible dread that some day she too might be forced to think that it was

true. Against that conviction she now fought with all her might, holding on to her early faith in him, and recalling numberless instances of his tenderness and gentleness. It was difficult, indeed, to believe that the man who had spoken of her mother in such reverential terms upon his death-bed, could at any time of his life have been the heartless scoundrel the Julius Hyde of Mrs. Johnstone's story appeared. Joyce could not and would not believe it ; and in her present grief and loneliness she clung to the memory of him as he had been to her with a heart-breaking tenacity. In many ways their histories were so much alike—so they seemed to her. The cold unemotional relations of them both had misunderstood them alike ; and as he in his anger and disdain had left them, and gone to make a new life for himself, untrammelled by their narrow influences and prejudices,

so would she, in her turn, fly from them and their evil judgments of her father and herself.

She had no definite plan in her head as she lay there shivering on her little bed in the darkness. She was as yet too stunned and confused to think connectedly on any subject; but by-and-by, as the long hours of the night wore on, some dim shaping of the life before her came to her.





CHAPTER XII.

IT was the middle of the night. All the inhabitants of Charrington Rectory lay buried in slumber save Joyce, whose eyes had not closed in sleep for a moment. She had heard them all go to bed: Flo first, who was always terribly sleepy of an evening; then the other girls and Mrs. Hyde, who all stopped for a few minutes' gossip in the drawing-room before separating; then Walter followed, going straight to his own room and shutting the door with a bang that was very unlike his usual way of doing things. Bob she could not hear; but his

Johnstone, peering out after her. "Julius Hyde should have known better than to have said that Johnstone was the only man in the county blind enough to marry me. I don't think his daughter will be Lady Ashton yet awhile. She has just his old impatient fiery spirit. I should not wonder if she ran away a bit. Oh, there is Walter! I wonder he has not met her."

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the sleepers, but they both slumbered heavily on, and soon Joyce was standing in the passage outside the rooms.

It was easy enough to glide softly along there, though not so easy to avoid the creaking boards that all old houses abound in. Once she stopped and half turned back, alarmed at the noise she made ; but no other sound following it, she soon stole on again.

Descending the stairs was a more troublesome business, there were so many sharp creaks and strains as her light feet touched the shaky old timbers ; but she got down at last. She had no difficulty about finding her way, for the moonlight was streaming in at the window like a silver flood, making the familiar hall look strange and ghostly in its weird light. Very softly she stole across on tip-toe, crossing the streak of silver that streamed down upon the floor

from the staircase-window, and then passing on to the gloom of the farther end. She stopped at her uncle's study-door, and gently opened it. Inside all was quite dark, for the shutters were closed and there was not a ray of light anywhere. Feeling about her very carefully for the chairs and tables, and nearly tumbling over the prayer-desk, which she quite forgot, Joyce reached the study-table. Here she felt carefully about with her hands for some pamphlets she had seen lying there many a time. She found some, and came back to the moonlight in the hall with them in her hand ; but they were not what she wanted. She went back and replaced them, and took up some others with the same result. The Archdeacon, with his customary untidiness, had of course removed them from their place and had not put them back again. It took her a long time to find them in the dark, and

she wished she knew where to find some matches ; but a hunt after them would have been quite as long a business as this search for the pamphlet—longer, in fact, as the whole house was eligible for the search. Nobody ever thought of keeping anything in any settled place in Charrington Rectory. So Joyce searched on, bringing all sorts of papers but the right one into the moonlight of the hall. At last when she was getting heartily tired and very cold, she found the one she desired, and noiselessly closing the door after her, stole down the hall again.

What was her terror when she got half-way to hear a slight noise outside the house by the staircase-window, as if some person were getting up ! Then, too, she noticed what had escaped her before, that this window was open. She knew that her aunt was particularly careful about closing it at

night, as it was easy to enter the house by that way, there being no shutters there.

In breathless alarm she stopped. The noise increased—some one was evidently ascending on the outside by means of the old ivy stems that formed a sort of trellis against the wall. For a single moment the impulse seized her to fly upstairs away to the safety of her own room ; but the knowledge that she would have to pass the open window restrained her, and she shrank into the passage leading to the kitchen, where the green baize door was fortunately unfastened. Behind this door, by reason of her being in deep shadow, she was not likely to be seen by the burglar or whoever it was that was now getting in at the window.

She was dreadfully frightened at first. All the awful stories she had ever heard of armed burglars bent on robbery and murder

rushed into her mind. She thought of the helpless sleepers overhead. Ought she not to warn them and rouse them, to make at least a fight for their lives and property? Then she reflected it was probable that these men would go to the dining-room after the plate first. In that case she would rush upstairs to her uncle and Walter. All these thoughts and many others rushed through her mind as she watched with trembling apprehension the dark figure of a man rise black and large against the white light of the moon.

There seemed to be only one man, for he climbed cautiously in without looking back or making any signs to anyone outside, and his muffled movements were the only sounds audible in the still night. Joyce feared he might hear her heart beating; it sounded so loud to her as he stepped over the sill and stood upon the

stairs. His back was towards her ; but he turned as he shut the window, and then she saw his face for the first time.

It was Robert ! The discovery sent a great thrill of relief through her for the first moment, to be however replaced by another pang. What could Robert have been about to get into the house in this burglarious fashion in the middle of the night, when everyone must have supposed him sound asleep in bed ? She was so completely astonished at this unexpected appearance of him, that she quite forgot her reasons for secrecy, and came out of the shadow of the doorway into the hall at the foot of the stairs. He caught the sound of her footstep, light as it was, and started and looked down in evident alarm.

The sight of her in her light wrapper, with her hair all hanging loosely about her shoulders, and the pale moonlight streaming

over her, and rendering almost death-like the paleness of her anxious face, so frightened him that he stumbled against the banisters and almost fell down the stairs in his alarm.

“ Robert,” she whispered.

“ Good heavens, Joyce, is that you ?”

The absurdity of his gaping open-mouthed terror so amused her, that even in the midst of her trouble and distress she gave a little low laugh.

“ Hush, for goodness’ sake !” cried Bob in a stealthy whisper, looking fearfully over his shoulder. “ The governor will hear !”

“ Well, why should he not ?” asked Joyce in a low voice.

“ Oh, well, I like that,” said Bob sulkily, coming down to where she was standing at the foot of the stairs. “ I suppose *you* would like all the household to come down and catch you going about like a ghost in a

ressing-gown in the middle of the night,
wouldn't you!"

"Well, I don't climb in at windows," said Joyce, feeling the force of Bob's retort.

"No, of course not," said Bob, still surlily; "girls don't do that sort of thing. They just creep around and sneak and spy. That's what girls do."

"I didn't," said Joyce angrily; "I never dreamt of spying upon you, Bob, you horrid, mean boy!"

"I didn't mean *you* did," said Bob, rather more gently; "now, don't get in a wax, Joyce, I didn't really; but you know the others do. I can't look at a water-rat but what they are poking their noses after it too. I say it's a beastly shame."

"But you are not after water-rats to-night?" asked Joyce, still in a whisper.

"No, of course not; but what is a fellow

to do who has no education, or money, or prospects, or anything, and nothing but an infernal lot of stuck-up prudes to talk to? I thought it was going to be different when you came, Joyce," looking reproachfully at her.

" Well, what could I do ?" she whispered, feeling a pang of reproach that she had neglected Bob so much lately. " You know they don't approve of me either, Bob."

" Oh, hang approbation !" said Bob viciously. " No ; what I mean is this, Joyce. If you had stuck to me I would have given it all up, I would really. Your coming made me drop it for a bit, it did really ; and then that prig Walter got hold of you, and kept you so to your books I could never get hold of you."

" What should I have kept you from ?" she asked, as he paused.

“Oh, I don’t know!” he said, in his old sulky gruff manner; “I don’t know now that things have gone too far. If you will only marry Ashton I’ll give it up, even now!”

“Oh, Bob, how can you!” she cried, in a low tone of pain; “how can you be like the others when you know I don’t—don’t love him!” she added with an effort.

“Oh, bosh!” said Bob angrily. “He is a nice fellow enough, I am sure; you could love him if you tried.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“But Joyce, really, you are not going to throw him over?”

“No, because he has never been mine, so I can’t do that; but I am not going to marry him, if you mean that.”

“Nonsense, Joyce!” said her cousin, seizing her by the arm; “just consider. You must really, Joyce.”

"I won't," said Joyce, freeing herself; "and if you say anything more I will call out and rouse everybody. You shall not try to frighten me, Bob."

"I wasn't going to frighten you," he said sullenly; "but, Joyce, you might really think what a good thing it would be for me. It would be the very making of me, it would indeed!"

"Oh, I can't, I can't—I can't sell myself," cried the girl, wringing her hands; "don't ask me to do it, Bob. It hurts me so to even hear it talked about. If I go away he will marry Flo, and then it will do just as well for you."

"Go away!" repeated Bob. "Joyce, you are not going away?"

"Where have you been?" she asked him, looking him full in the face.

He shuffled uneasily about.

"What's that to you?" he said at last.

“A precious lot you care as to what becomes of me!”

“I do care, Bob. I would do anything for you except—except that. Oh, Bob, you are not in any mischief, are you?”

“No,” he said, reluctantly. “No, Joyce.”

“Won’t you tell me what it is?”

“No,” he said; “but it’s nothing wrong, Joyce.”

“It’s not drinking, Bob?”

“No, nothing of that sort. I won’t tell you, Joyce; but it’s nothing wrong.”

There was a long pause after this. Joyce longed to ask him something, but she could not bring her lips to frame such a question. At last, drawing close to him, she said in a very low voice:

“Bob, did you ever hear anything about—about my father and the Leybournes?”

Bob shook her off almost roughly.

“It’s nothing of that sort I am after,” he

herself neatly in a somewhat old grey woollen dress, that she had brought with her from San Francisco. It was a plain, tight-fitting, neatly-made dress, with a little cape to match it. Then she selected from her drawers a small quantity of linen, and a useful winter dress. These, with a few other trifles, she made into a parcel the length of her father's gun-case, which she took down from the wall, and carefully tied the clothing fast to it, so as to make one long package.

Having put on her ulster and hat, and laced up her boots, she sat down at her little dressing-table and wrote two letters. One she directed to her uncle. It was as follows :

“ DEAR UNCLE AND AUNT,

“ I am very much obliged to you for all your kindness to me ever since I came

here, and in having me here at all. It was not until yesterday (Tuesday) that I knew how unpleasant it must have been to you to have me here, believing what you do about my father. I wish I had known what wicked things had been said of him before, for then I would never have troubled anybody here with my presence. I am going away now where nobody will ever find me or know anything about me ; so please don't trouble to look for me, for you will never find me. Please tell Sir Ethelred from me that I do appreciate his kindness in asking me to be his wife, very, very much—more now than I did at first—but that I never can be so. Even if I loved him, I would never marry him until this shameful story against my father is cleared up ; but I do not love him, nor ever could do so, only like him very much, and hope he will soon marry some one who will make him very happy.

Please give my love to all my cousins, and I am sorry they have not been able to like me better, and that I have been so troublesome to them. Dear aunt and uncle, don't ever search for me—I shall be quite, quite gone ; and believe me that I am not ungrateful to you, only I cannot stay here any longer. My best love to you both.

“ Your affectionate niece,

“ JOYCE HYDE.”

This being done, she fastened up the letter and laid it on her dressing-table, where it would be easily seen. Then having again looked at the railway time-tables she had fetched from the Archdeacon's study, and made a careful note in her memory of the fares and the names of the principal stations, Joyce consulted her father's watch, which she always wore, and saw that it would soon be time to depart.

She looked carefully all about the room to make sure she had forgotten nothing she wished to take with her, and after counting her little stock of money for the twentieth time, she fastened it and the few jewels she possessed inside her dress, leaving out only enough for her fare. She carefully arranged her room, putting away neatly all the articles of apparel she had taken out during her packing ; and coming across her hat with the drooping white feathers, she pinned a bit of paper with the words " For Flo, with Joyce's love " upon it, and put it on a chair beside her bed. She knew that Flo secretly admired this hat, also that it suited her very well, and she was glad to leave it for her, hoping that it might be taken as a little expression of friendly interest in her and as a sort of make-up after their late estrangement. Some other little keepsakes she found for the two elder girls and arranged

in like manner ; then taking a farewell look about her, she raised the trap-door in the floor, and softly went down the stairs.

She had no difficulty in getting out, and she preferred going this way because it would leave her absence longer unnoticed than if the servants had come down and found the front or side door unfastened.

It was still very dim and grey when Joyce stepped out from the house. The sun had not risen, and there was that chill raw look over everything that the very early morning brings. She softly closed the door after her, and then cast one look up at the slumbering old house with the blinded windows, going past the end of the lawn as she did so, and entering the farm-yard. A whine from the setter pups, now advancing towards doghood, announced that her footsteps were heard in their kennel. She stooped and caressed them

for a moment, then rose and hung a little note, directed to Bob, on a nail outside their house, where she knew his eye would be the first to see it, and with another look at the house and the tall trees about it, took her way softly across the yard into the road.

She had little fear of meeting anyone at such an early hour, though she cast an anxious glance towards Mrs. Johnstone's glittering little window ; but the blind was drawn, and Ashton Vicarage looked as deathly quiet as Charrington Rectory. She stopped at the bend in the road to look back once more at the home she was leaving. In the dull grey of the morning, its stained many-tinted bricks gave it a healthful tender glow of colour that contrasted well with the heavy green of the trees and dull grey of the sky. It had never looked so homelike, warm, and com-



fortable to her as it did now when she stood in the road on the point of running away from it. If it had not been for the story she had heard last night, she would have returned to it even now; but Mrs. Johnstone's bitter tale had made her feel the social outcast that she now believed her relations had always regarded her to be. A great lump rose up in the poor girl's throat as she looked her last good-bye to all the home that was left her upon earth, and there were tears in her eyes as she turned and walked along the road towards the church. She met no one on her way; but as she passed across the great hop-gardens, she saw the first streaks of the yellow dawn breaking through a rift of cloud in the east. At any other time she would have paused to note the gradual breaking up of the sombre grey, and the shafts of light spreading up like plumes of

flame into the dome of heaven. But now they only warned her that she must hasten her steps, or she would miss her early train at Moulbury. So with swift feet she passed the long poles on which the clustering hops were already making arches and festoons of brightest green, past the stile on which she had once sat, and from which she now turned away her head as she ran down the hill to the church.

She went across the churchyard and then over some wide fields, white in places with low-springing mushrooms, into a wood beyond. It was little more than a tangled coppice, with blackberry bushes and brakes of fern and wild-flowers; but she pushed her way down a winding pathway, and soon stood upon the brink of a rapid though narrow and deep river. There was a stop-gate here. Joyce knew the place well, for she and the girls and Bob had often come

there in their walks. She had never crossed the stop-gate, but she had seen Bob run across the plank at the tops of the closed gates often enough.

Now, however, she found to her dismay that the gates were open and the water was rushing down the stream with great force, eddying round some sunken posts and depositing quite a little collection of sticks and refuse on a bank of weeds at the side. For a moment she stood confounded. There was no other bridge, she knew, for several miles, not, in fact, nearer than the bridge on the road from Charrington village to the station, and that road for obvious reasons she avoided; besides, she would lose so much time now in retracing her steps, or in following the winding of the river. She looked all about her. She could swim like a fish; but she doubted her ability to get her clothing across dry. Suddenly an idea

occurred to her. She would climb up to the beam on the top of the framework and work her way along that. For a boy this would not have been a very perilous feat; but for a girl encumbered by her petticoats and carrying a heavy parcel and umbrella it was no such easy matter. However, it was the only thing to be done, so Joyce immediately set about doing it after her own impulsive hasty fashion.

The sun had risen now and sent his red beams full over the eastern heavens, and with his rising a light breeze had sprung up that wafted the odours of the flowery marshes across the stream to her. She had no difficulty about getting upon the great beam that stretched some eight feet above the water, and was supported by sloping pieces of wood on either side; but it was not so easy to keep a steady footing upon it, incommoded by her bundle and a wind

blowing down the stream. Her mountain experience served her well, however, for she crossed it without even a passing feeling of giddiness, and with the solitary mishap of her hat's being blown off in the middle, and finding a lodgment in the heap of weeds and refuse by the shore she had just left.

She would not go back to fetch it. Time was pressing her, and she regretted its loss the less as she had a soft felt winter hat in her bundle. This she put on, and soothed herself by the reflection that she was more likely to be recognised or identified in the straw hat she habitually wore than in her present one, which she had never used at Charrington.

Safely over the river, her path lay across the wide green marshes towards the low-lying distant hills. She was far away from Marshsted and the marshes about Shere

xx *A WESTERN WILDFLOWER.*

Court; and in some respects these marshes differed from those, in being drier and more scattered and in having fewer dykes and treacherous bogs. Nevertheless she found a considerable difficulty in reaching the early rising hill without getting both wet and fatigued. The sun being now up, and the bird and insect life, in which all such low-lying places abound, having now fully awakened, Joyce felt her spirits rise, and even enjoyed her morning scramble. It was true that she was leaving much behind; but then might she not be going on to much more before? She thought of her father once bent upon the same quest as herself, and voluntarily resigning far deeper and stronger ties than any that bound her to Channington. Like him, too, she set out for a new world: but, instead of the pathless forests of the West, she went towards the teeming wilderness of London, a country

vaster and more unknown to her than even mountain wilds were to him. As she recalled her last interview with him and dwelt on the tones in which he had spoken of her mother, she could not but acknowledge to herself that he had been more blessed in the renunciation of his home-life than ever she could expect to be, for her heart went back with a yearning longing to the gloomy old house by the water-side and the presence of Austin Leybourne.

On the top of the low ridge to which she had climbed, she strained her eyes to catch a glimpse, however distant, of the trees of Shere Court; but the table-land of Charrington parish hid them from her view; and with a deep sigh she turned her face towards the still distant city. Crossing the ridge she came down again into marshes. She was glad to come to them again, for she had been fearful of meeting labourers among the

fields she had passed. In the wide uncultivated marshes, provided she avoided any direct carriage road, she was safe from wayfarers.

It was not so easy to get across this great reach of waving green that spread like a sea before her feet; she had never been across this "level," and there were no direct paths, only tracks used by the red cattle that were feeding lazily in the deep grass, and by the few people whose business it was at intervals to see after these cattle and the sheep that dotted the pastures. There was no one in sight now, as Joyce looked over the wide expanse before plunging into it, trying to form some sort of idea of the ways of its watercourses and the position of its few bridges. From this place she could see the distant towers of Moulbury Cathedral glinting in the early rays of the sun, and looking as if made of burnished silver. She

well remembered her emotions on the first sight of those venerable towers and the hopes and golden dreams that lay before her as a future. Where were they, and her father's, and Austin Leybourne's, and all others' beautiful youthful dreams? Did they all fade away in dim grey coldness, as the stones of these same gleaming towers became cold and grey and time-stained as one neared them? They looked now, with the blue morning mist about their feet concealing all that was vulgar and mean in the creeping streets around them, like some fairy vision or youthful dream of heaven. They almost seemed to float upon the pale mysteries beneath them, and to sparkle and shimmer in the sunlight. Joyce was so entranced in looking at their fantastic magnificence that for some time she forgot her journey and the object of it, but suddenly remembering both, she plunged forward into

the billowy green and walked steadily on.

She made a good many mistakes and false turns, and was several times compelled to retrace her steps, which had brought her to the borders of some impassable morass or bridgeless dyke ; but she toiled on bravely, keeping the shining towers, growing every moment more grey and cold, before her.

The marshes stretched right up to the very foot of the town, only they became fields and damp gardens for some little space before they reached it.

It was past six o'clock when Joyce entered the streets and lanes of the city. She was feeling strangely tired and weary, though the walk had not been more than six or seven miles ; but her want of sleep and the crisis of mind she had gone through were beginning to tell even on her hardy young frame.

She went into an early baker's shop that by good fortune happened to be open, and purchased a loaf of bread from a small, stupid-looking boy who was taking the shutters down, and from thence found her way to the station.

She was only just in time for her train, and the platform was tolerably well filled with men and women going to some horse-show. It was fortunate for Joyce that this was so, for nobody seemed to take any notice of her, or to think it strange that a girl like herself should travel by so early a train, as she had been afraid they would do. She took a third-class ticket to London, and found a seat in a corner of a carriage when the train came up.

She shrank back from observation as much as possible, but could not resist the desire to see once more the cathedral towers that had so impressed her upon her

first arrival. She looked out and watched for them as the train went slowly out of the station. There they were, looking so cold and stony and grey in the full light of the morning that Joyce sank back disappointed, chilled, and depressed. Their purple evening grandeur against a glowing sky, as when she had first seen them, and their fairy, silvery radiance of the early morning, viewed across the waving marshes, had all vanished. There they stood, grey, solemn, cold, and time-worn, like monuments of a decaying faith and of a love that had grown cold.

END OF VOL. II.



